AA

Architecture and the housing crisis

Designing an equitable future

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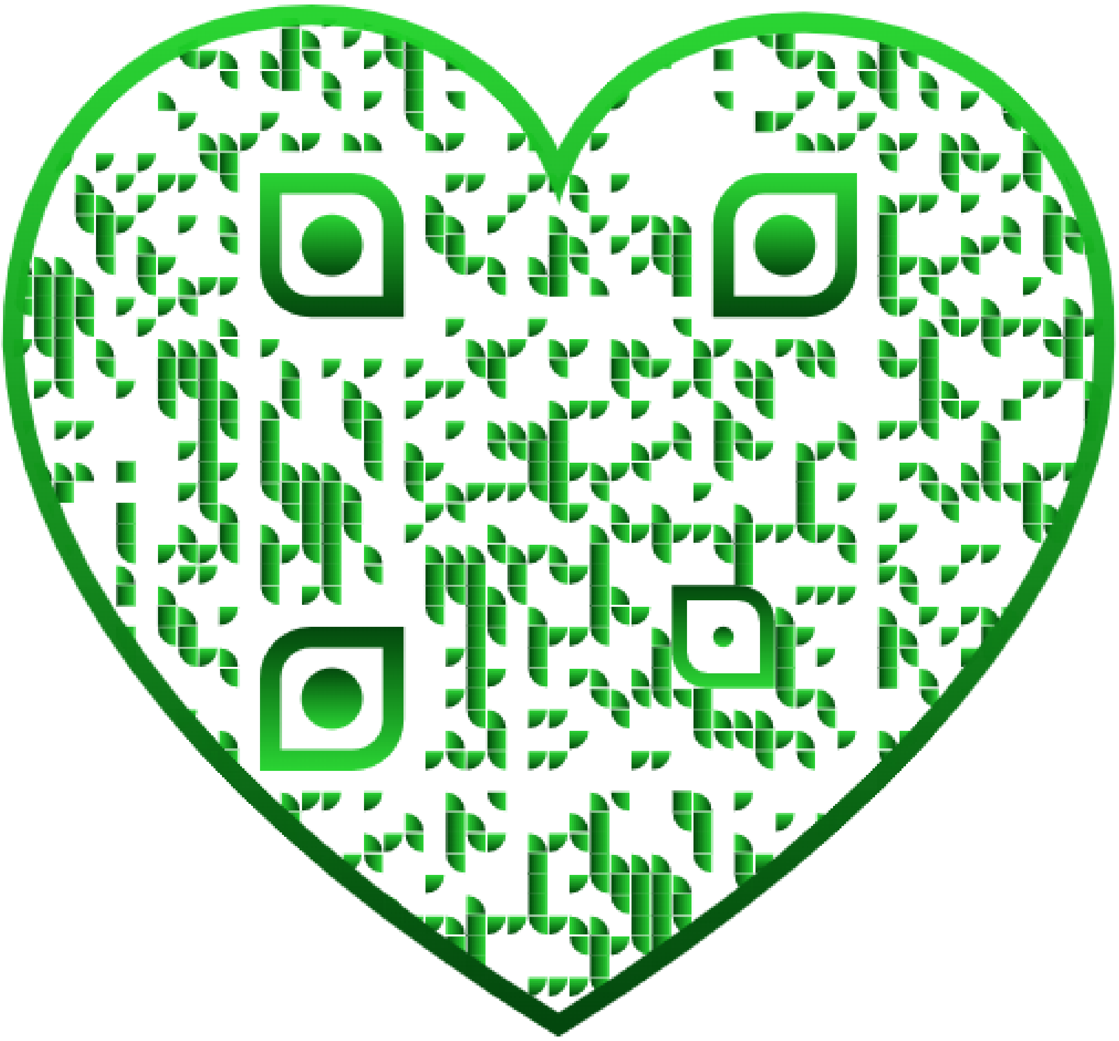
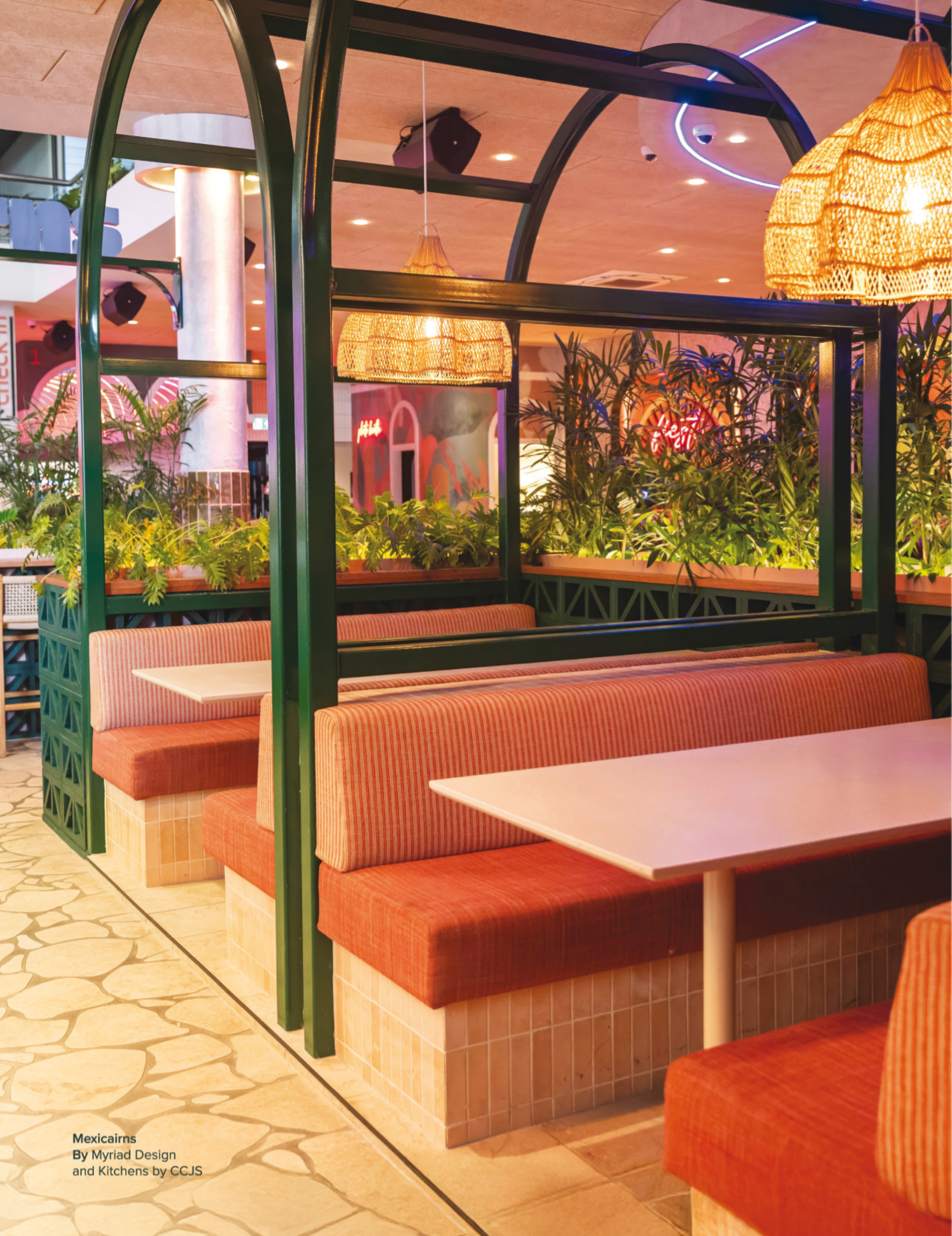
Architecture Australia — Since 1904

Jul / Aug 2025





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(COVER IMAGE)	Shiel Street North Melbourne, Community Housing Project by Clare Cousins Architects
(PHOTOGRAPHER)	Tess Kelly

(FOREWORD)

Designing a better Australia

I am both honoured and excited to be stepping into the role of national president of the Australian Institute of Architects. This is a crucial time for our country and industry. Sustainability is the greatest challenge of our lives, housing affordability the greatest of our generation.

Firstly, I must congratulate our outgoing national president, Jane Cassidy, on her phenomenal work. She is an absolute powerhouse who has helped reposition the Institute and our profession for success. Of particular note is Jane's advocacy that led to all state and territory housing ministers agreeing on mandatory and aligned carbon reporting; her leadership in collaboration with the CEO to structurally realign the business of the Institute to ensure we are equipped for the next 50 years; and her leadership in appointing the first all-First-Nations curators to represent Australia at the Venice Biennale of Architecture.

Being national president is like participating in one long running relay: our role is to pick up where the last president finished and ensure that we run a good race for the next.

As an organisation we can often be accused of acting too slowly, but we need to recognise the important work that's happened and the work that is in train, to ensure that the structure of the organisation is able to deliver with pride and excellence.

So, my promise is that I will continue to champion Jane's initiatives to ensure that they are implemented effectively, while at the same time weaving three new objectives into the discussion:

Firstly, putting our profession in the driving seat to help solve the national housing crisis. This will be achieved by engaging in the ecosystem of housing – across treasury, tax, health, education and infrastructure investment – with the ultimate aim of securing Australia's first federal government architect. This role would provide expert advice to government and would collaborate with state, territory and city architects about where best to invest and how best to solve the housing challenge for the people of Australia.

Secondly, working out, as an organisation, how to better listen, engage and mobilise our regional, rural and international members. I grew up in the regions and believe they, and our members who support them, represent some of the most untapped potential when it comes to settlement, housing and equity. Our regional members cannot continue to shout from the rural high streets or farming paddocks hoping that we will hear them. We must do better.

Finally, a big ambition: achieving a seismic shift in thinking from architects to architecture for the Institute and its advocacy agenda. Working with national council, the board and many factions of influence, we will work to uncover a more outward-facing organisation to continue advocating for the role of architecture in our communities. This shift will not only help us live the outcomes we want to see but will also enable us to collect all our colleagues who trained in architecture but who don't fit the registration model directed by government. We need the academics, design managers, project managers, landscape architects, urban designers and interior designers who all trained in architecture to be in the "tent," so that together we can advocate more broadly for what we believe in – that through good design, Australia is a better place. Thank you for bestowing the honour on me. Let the work begin.

— Adam Haddow, National President,
Australian Institute of Architects

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(REFLECTION)

Architecture and the housing crisis

(ACKNOWLEDGEMENT) We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia and recognise their continuing connection to land, waters and culture. We pay our respects to their Elders past, present and emerging.

The global housing crisis is not strictly an architectural problem, but with the increasing demand for more supply, architects have a vital role to play in shifting the canon towards a more equitable housing future. This issue of *Architecture Australia* collects a series of exemplar housing projects that demonstrate the variety of built outcomes being delivered across Australia. To broaden the conversation, our dossier focuses on different pathways of architectural advocacy and agency in the pursuit to solve the housing problem.

The current scale of government investment in social and affordable housing in Australia has the potential to be transformative. Shiel Street North Melbourne, Community Housing Project by Clare Cousins Architects (cover, page 12), “illustrates the potential for dignified, design-led social housing” based around “low-cost, high-impact design,” writes Rebecca Roke. Taking a different approach and tackling a larger scale is Bangs Street, Prahran by Jackson Clements Burrows Architects (page 60). This project in Melbourne creates 434 new mixed-tenure homes on a previously disused estate of 120 dwellings, and showcases a new public-private partnership strategy that retains longterm public ownership of the land. As Andy Fergus notes, “the project offers a number of critical lessons for the next generation of estate regeneration.”

Elsewhere, in Townsville, Mundingburra Housing by Counterpoint Architecture (page 34) highlights a successful built result of the design competition and demonstration project model, which Helen Norrie argues has supported, in this case, “the agency of the architect to facilitate good design outcomes.” We also invited Rory Hyde to delve into the opportunities and realities of design competitions and demonstration projects in Australia, to reflect on whether they’re enough to shift the status quo (page 48).

Beyond the urgent need for more social and affordable housing, there is demand for models that increase density while respecting neighbourhood need. Hope Street Housing by Officer Woods Architects in collaboration with MDC Architects (page 78) is a private development that turns a site originally zoned for low-volume detached homes into a series of 28 community-conscious townhouses. “It is the sort of project that is equally good for developers, residents and community,” shares Emily Van Eyk. Meanwhile, Linda Cheng explores whether the answer to our housing woes is in the stock that already exists in our suburbs (page 50). Although the built environment industry is not the sole contributor to the housing crisis or its solutions, architects have both the capacity and responsibility to champion better solutions. As Damian Madigan reminds us in a roundtable discussion with Sarah Buckeridge and Diana Snape on housing policy approaches (page 44), “You must act with hope and positivity, and you must act with conviction.” We hope this edition reminds our readers of the optimism and resilience required when advocating for change that benefits all.

This issue also celebrates the winners, commendations and shortlisted projects of the 2025 ArchitectureAu Award for Social Impact. Our joint winners, Habilis by Collins and Turner, and Munarra Centre for Regional Excellence by ARM Architecture, are examples of the shifting mode of architectural practice where social value is considered at every stage of the project. Congratulations to all recognised this year.

— Katelin Butler and Georgia Birks

(CORRECTION)

In the project credits for the Eva and Marc Besen Centre (*Architecture Australia* May/June 2025), Architecture and Access was mislabelled as a consulting building surveyor. Architecture and Access provided access consultancy services on the project.

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Rebecca Roke

Rebecca Roke is an author, editor and researcher focused on innovative medium-density housing. As editorial director and cofounder of Corvo, she collaborates with design and architectural clients, including Grimshaw, Foster and Partners, Heatherwick Studio, Phaidon Press, Thames and Hudson, and Prestel Publishing.

(WRITER, PAGE 12)

Tess Kelly

Tess Kelly is an architecture, interiors and still life photographer based in Melbourne. Tess has been working as a commercial photographer for over 15 years and her work is often featured in architecture and design publications both nationally and internationally.

(PHOTOGRAPHER, PAGE 12)

Emily Taylor

Emily Taylor is an associate at Core Collective Architects, based in Nipaluna/Hobart. Emily co-designed Isabel and Elsie: Homes Designed to Nurture Women and Children's Wellbeing and Recovery from Homelessness, which was shortlisted for the 2024 ArchitectureAu Award for Social Impact.

(WRITER, PAGE 28)

Andrew Rankin

Andrew Rankin is a photographer with a special interest in design and architecture. His work has appeared in several solo and group exhibitions. Having worked all over Australia he is now located in Hobart.

(PHOTOGRAPHER, PAGE 34)

Brendan Coates

Brendan Coates is the Housing and Economic Security program director at Grattan Institute.

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(WRITER, PAGE 52)

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Alexis Kalagas works across urban strategy, research, design and development. He has a specific interest in housing, neighbourhoods and urban futures.

(WRITER, PAGE 56)

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Shiel Street North Melbourne, Community Housing Project

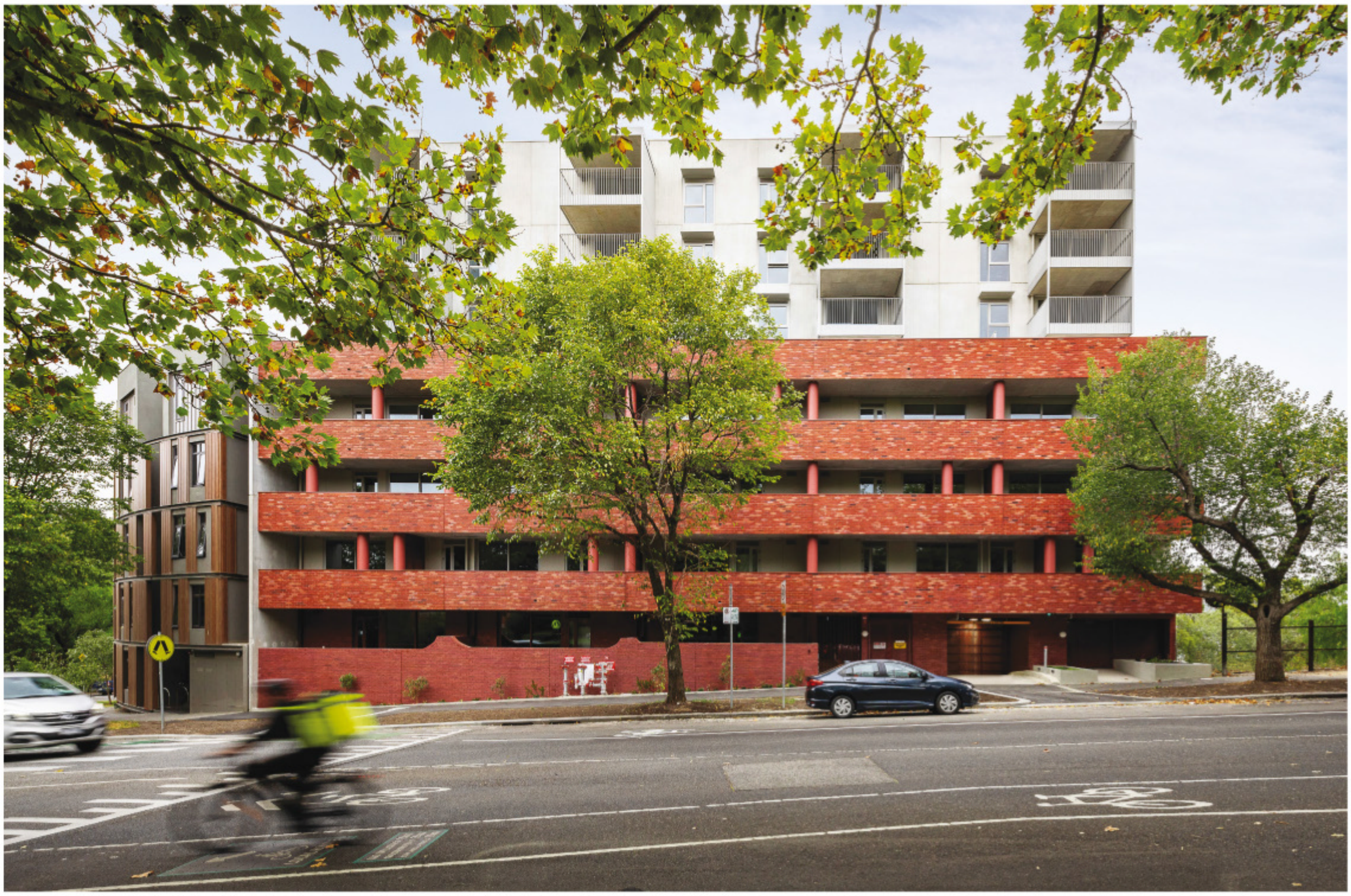
(COUNTRY)	Wurundjeri
(LOCATION)	Naarm/Melbourne, Vic
(REVIEWER)	Rebecca Roke
(PHOTOGRAPHER)	Tess Kelly

(ARCHITECT)

Clare Cousins Architects

●

TYPE OF SUPPLY	Community housing
SITE AREA	1,311 m²
DWELLINGS IN PROJECT	78
DWELLINGS PREVIOUSLY ON SITE	0
DENSITY (DWELLINGS PER HECTARE)	595
DWELLINGS CONSTRUCTED FOR FUTURE SPECIALIST DISABILITY ACCOMMODATION ADAPTATIONS	5
DWELLINGS MANAGED BY ABORIGINAL HOUSING VICTORIA	11
CAR AND BIKE SPACES	30 car 81 bike
HEIGHT (STOREYS)	9
CLOSEST PUBLIC TRANSPORT	20 m



An innovative and replicable new housing project in inner-Naarm/Melbourne shows a path forward for creating practical, dignified community housing at scale and within ambitious timeframes.

Aligned with the leafy boulevard of the same name in North Melbourne, Shiel Street North Melbourne Community Housing Project by Clare Cousins Architects is a social housing development providing 78 dwellings over eight levels with a goal of delivering stable tenure to low-income residents, including people living with disability. With its red brick bands, striking offset columns and textured concrete upper levels, the project is a fresh, bold counterpoint to the streetscape of genteel Victorian villas and nondescript apartment blocks, while the notable walk-up Hotham Gardens housing development (1961, Master Builders Association) is just a short walk away. Like Hotham Gardens, Shiel Street strives to offer practical yet dignified social housing at density: a home, not just an apartment, in a well-located suburb close to transport, education and employment opportunities.

Shiel Street is part of a growing portfolio of exemplary, medium-density social housing apartments delivered by not-for-profit provider Housing Choices Australia (HCA). In recent years, HCA's strategy has scaled up its development with a focus on quality, design-led housing that anticipates the transition to independent energy. This has driven the commissioning of notable projects in locations across Victoria, including in St Albans with NMBW and MADA (2021), in Preston with Six Degrees (2023)

`(PREVIOUS)`	Striking brick bands, offset columns and textured concrete levels offer a fresh, bold counterpoint to the area's genteel terraces.
`(ABOVE)`	The plan avoided disrupting established trees, protecting the street's leafy outlook and thermal protection.
`(RIGHT)`	Robust finishes of textured concrete and brick cladding helped deliver a hard-wearing, low-maintenance build.

and in Belmont with Kennedy Nolan (2024). HCA's aim is to draw on skilled consultants to produce efficient, innovative and replicable housing approaches with a focus on an improved resident experience. As HCA senior development manager Matt Harris notes, "We know that first-order principles add so much to the lived experience … and [these projects] have built a sound set of HCA design guidelines."

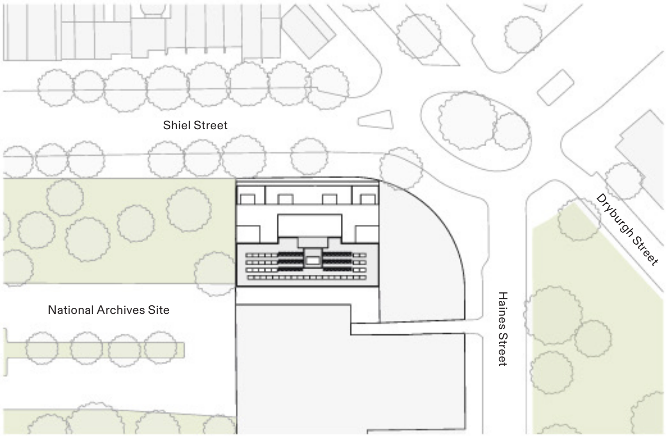
Achieving Shiel Street in a tight timeframe was ambitious: it is a difficult, deep site that had foiled preceding speculative yield targets. The project was delivered under Homes Victoria's Big Build Rapid Grants Round, with debt facility finalised through Treasury Corporation Victoria. Clare Cousins Architects won the competitive bid, but the grant allowed only a few weeks to deliver the design in order to meet the Big Build funding round. Fortunately, the practice's earlier feasibility study for the site provided a clear direction to work from. The build was also quick: only 18 months from breaking ground to completion. Director Clare Cousins credits a genuinely smooth collaboration between HCA, her practice and builder Buxton Construction as being key to the streamlined design and construct process. "There was real investment and goodwill by all parties to deliver something great for HCA and the future residents," she says.

The impetus to deliver social housing at speed to answer Victoria's severe shortages meant that strategic site decisions had to be made swiftly to set up the bones of the project. Here, Clare Cousins Architects' expertise in careful, pragmatic choices came to the fore. The deep site is organised into two building clusters with broad circulation and lift cores at the centre of each level. The design used the steep site topography to its advantage by nesting 30 car spaces at basement level, minimising excavation costs. The single (rather than double) crossover to access the parking is a regulatory win, allowing the protection of two deep-root plane trees, which contribute to the leafy outlook for residents and support thermal protection for the neighbourhood.

Clare Cousins Architects' efficient volumetric decisions are further emphasised by the single setback for the upper storeys above level four, and a flush rear facade of textured pre-cast concrete. The streamlined form eschews eccentric floor plan variations and minimises potential water ingress points. Paired with tough yet textural finishes of concrete and brick cladding, it delivers a low-maintenance build. This aspect is critical for HCA: hard-wearing housing supports effective property maintenance and maximises the ability to house residents throughout the building's lifespan of 40 or more years.

The volumetric arrangement brings both repetition and diversity: the two prevailing rectilinear volumes are simply stacked on top of each other, providing efficient, repeating floor plates that deliver up to 10 apartments per floor. Within this modularity, layouts provide 14 variations of one- and two-bedroom apartments, as well as much-needed three-bedroom apartments suitable for larger family groups that were specified in the brief. The program includes five apartments ready for future adaptation to specialist disability accomodation, while 11 homes across the project are allocated for Aboriginal Housing Victoria, with whom HCA shares a strong partnership. HCA's mandate to include housing for varied needs and levels of mobility is captured by its director, James Henry: "We always provide project-specific briefs tailored to specific places and people … [and] we are lucky to work on projects at a range of densities, tenures and climates that inevitably produce different types of homes."

Each unit features solid, opaque doors to internal walkways. While this doesn't allow for incidental neighbourly outlooks seen in classic precedents such as London's Golden Lane Estate (completed 1962, Chamberlin, Powell and Bon), it does allow residents control over how much and what type of neighbourly contact they enjoy. Studies have illustrated that this degree of choice is a key aspect to encourage a sense of privacy at density.[1]


Shiel Street
National Archives Site
Haines Street
Dryburgh Street

Site plan
1:1000

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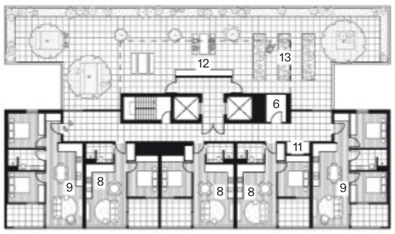
(FLOOR PLANS)

1 Open air bike store
2 Basement ramp
3 Substation
4 Entry
5 Mail
6 Waste
7 Scooter parking
8 One bed apartment
9 Two bed apartment
10 Three bed apartment
11 Apartment store
12 Barbecue
13 Vegetable garden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Level eight floor plan
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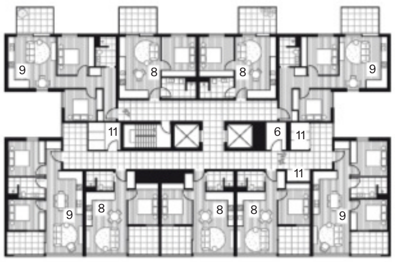
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Level five to seven floor plan
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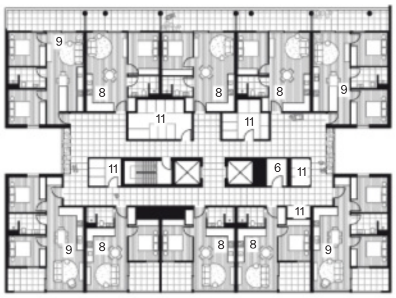
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Level two and three floor plan
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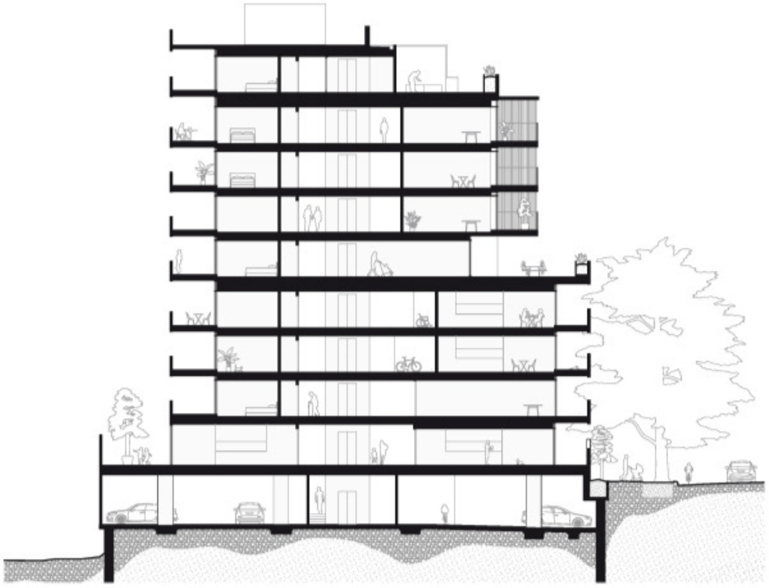

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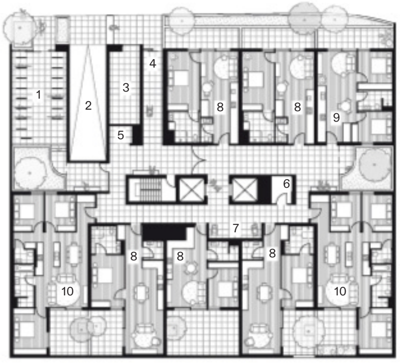
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Ground floor plan
1:750

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A similar strategy to support choice and social interaction underpins the inclusion of communal areas at levels four and eight, which offer spacious suntraps. At level four, a flexible-use room that is programmed by HCA opens to a broad, north-facing terrace. Here, drought-resistant planting by Kate Patterson Landscape Architects tumbles over planter boxes, punctuating the shared space. At level eight, purpose-built vegetable gardens encourage residents to grow their own food crops.

With an average tenure of nine years, social housing provides an essential base from which residents can build their lives. Keeping this in mind, Clare Cousins Architects' consideration for designing someone's home – not just an apartment – threads through its approach. This can be traced from the care for interior specifications to the strategic massing. "It's a highly rational, utilitarian building, but ultimately it is for people," Cousins explains. "We love that by using small levers in design decisions, through material and orientation and bigger feasibility moves, we make the best homes we can."

A bespoke artwork by artist Alex Kerr greets visitors at the entrance, complementing the lobby's rich burgundy and rose hues. Apartment interiors are composed of durable, contemporary elements: strip timber vinyl provides warm tones underfoot and is a counterpoint to the sleek stainless steel benchtops and D-handles that punctuate punchy grey-blue laminate cabinetry. Bathrooms lined with modern textured porcelain tiles bring sophisticated detail to the generously proportioned spaces, and echo the splashbacks in kitchens.

With energy poverty being a concern for low-income residents, the project also seeks to reduce operational energy by including double-glazing, ceiling fans and dual-aspect floor plans to bolster cross ventilation. Every home has an outdoor area of at least nine square metres, and thought has been given to achieve equity between different apartment types. For example, north-facing ribbon balconies at levels one to four provide elongated outdoor spaces that capture wide slices of sunlight as well as offering street privacy, while upper-level balconies enjoy sweeping birds-eye views of the city skyline.

It is sobering to calculate that these 78 homes are a fraction of the social housing needed to meet the Victorian Housing Register's waitlist of approximately 65,000 people as of December 2024.[2] Against this backdrop, Shiel Street illustrates the potential for dignified, design-led social housing. Its practical principles and "low-cost, high-impact" design solutions are a positive role model in the context of Victoria's contentious redevelopment of public housing towers and the pressing demand for a greater spectrum of middle- and low-income housing choice. Paired with HCA's determination to develop projects like this at scale, Shiel Street offers a glimmer of hope.

— Rebecca Roke is an author, editor and researcher focused on innovative medium-density housing. As editorial director and cofounder of Corvo, she collaborates with design and architectural clients, including Grimshaw, Foster and Partners, Heatherwick Studio, Phaidon Press, Thames and Hudson, and Prestel Publishing.

(PREVIOUS TOP)	Warm strip-timber vinyl flooring balances smart stainless steel countertops and grey-blue laminate cabinetry.
(PREVIOUS BOTTOM)	Solid doors to that open to internal communal walkways allow residents to control neighbourly engagement.
(ABOVE)	Each apartment enjoys private outdoor space, with elongated, sun-filled ribbon balconies on lower levels, and terraces with skyline views on upper levels.

(FOOTNOTES)

(1) Jane Darke and Roy Darke, *Who Needs Housing?* (Macmillan, 1979); Bryan Lawson, "The social and psychological issues of high-density city space," in Edward Ng (ed.), *Designing High-Density Cities: For Social and Environmental Sustainability* (Taylor and Francis, 2010), 285–292.

(2) "Social housing waitlist increases again, now topping 65,000," Council to Homeless Persons, 10 April 2025, chp.org.au/article/social-housing-waitlist-increases-again-now-topping-65000 (accessed May 2025).

Architect Clare Cousins Architects; Project team Clare Cousins, Aida Stopa, Matt Sansom, Jessica Wood, Tom Goodchild, Maddie Di Salvo, Timothy Mettam, Jamie Bond; Builder Buxton Construction; Structural engineer and civil consultant Webber Design; Services and ESD consultant JBA Consulting Engineers; Fire safety engineer Omnii; Building surveyor RBS Building Surveyors; Acoustic consultant Clarity Acoustics; Landscape architect Kate Patterson Landscape Architects; Town planner Tract; Artist Alex Kerr; NCC consultant DDEG; Consultant building surveyor United Building Consultants

Architecture Industry Decarbonisation Plan 2025-2050

A pathway to net-zero emissions
for a sustainable future

Quay Quarter Tower | 3XN with Executive Architect BVN | Photographer: Adam Mørk

Habilis

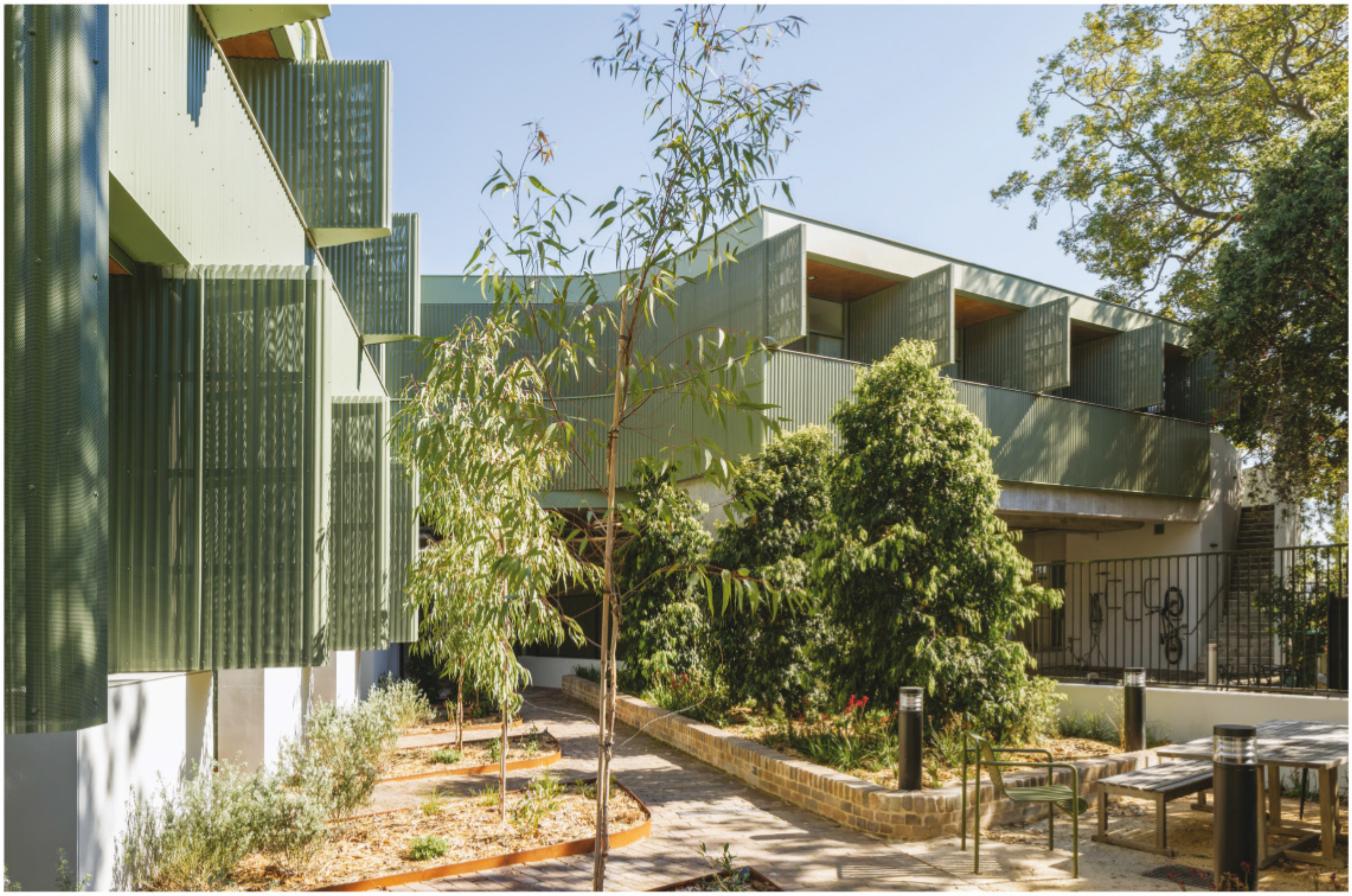
(COUNTRY)	Gadigal
(LOCATION)	Warrane/Sydney, NSW
(REVIEWER)	Andrew Scott
(PHOTOGRAPHER)	Katherine Lu

(ARCHITECT)

Collins and Turner

●

TYPE OF SUPPLY	Social housing
SITE AREA	1,071 m²
DWELLINGS IN PROJECT	21
DWELLINGS PREVIOUSLY ON SITE	0
DENSITY (DWELLINGS PER HECTARE)	196.1
DWELLINGS CONSTRUCTED FOR ACCESSIBLE SOLE OCCUPANCY	2
DWELLINGS CONSTRUCTED TO SPECIALIST DISABILITY ACCOMMODATION IMPROVED LIVEABILITY STANDARDS	15
CAR SPACES	5
HEIGHT (STOREYS)	2
CLOSEST PUBLIC TRANSPORT	<100 m



With a design that provides moments of domesticity and dignity, Habilis transforms a remnant industrial site into a space of holistic mental health care for those with a history of homelessness.

This is a good project. By this I mean it is a good work of architecture that also provides a compelling solution to a pressing societal challenge. Having formed this opinion, I was interested to later hear practising psychiatrist and project instigator Professor Olav Nielssen observe, "We've built a Potemkin Village; there is no one who experiences the project that does not come away saying it is for good."

The notion of a Potemkin Village stems from the no-doubt exaggerated story of Empress Catherine II and her 1787 Dnieper River journey to visit newly annexed Crimea. Her lover, field marshal Grigory Potemkin, in an apparent act of heroic gallantry, organised for pretty stage-set facades to be built and peopled with brightly dressed, happy folk to obscure the war-torn countryside beyond. As soon as the entourage passed a town, the facades were dismantled and swiftly rebuilt further downstream, ready to beguile the cavalcade again.

Nielssen's allusion centres the great benefit of architecture in how the project is perceived, rather than its more conventionally appreciated functional aspects. This astute observation compellingly demonstrates the capacity of architecture to project values and signal intent, and that this benefit is both intrinsic and powerful.

(PREVIOUS)	Habilis is a collection of 21 serviced apartments and includes dedicated clinical and communal spaces whose spatial qualities deinstitutionalise psychiatric care.
(ABOVE)	An outdoor dining area and barbecue, centred in the project amongst emerging gardens, sits adjacent to an undercover open space used for vehicles and social gatherings.
(RIGHT)	Upper-level dwellings are accessed by perimeter circulation paths, while ground-floor dwellings are accessed from the front via garden thresholds.

Habilis is the name of an initiative to develop and manage long-term housing for homeless people suffering from acute mental illness. It is also the name of the first of these developments, located in Summer Hill and commenced in late 2019 with the purchase of a remnant industrial site, enabled by private philanthropy and New South Wales government funding.

The context is defined by frontage to Parramatta Road, Sydney's hectic east–west arterial. Low-scale warehouses and freestanding dwellings lie to the south of the site, which has a long east frontage to Hawthorne Canal. While the riparian zone is currently a motley mess of scrub and fading litter, work is underway to renew the culvert infrastructure as a biodiversity corridor and recreation space, part of the emerging Sydney Green Grid.

The philosophy underlying the project finds its origins in the great 1978 shift in mental health treatment that occurred in Trieste, Italy, when a radical law was introduced that closed psychiatric hospitals one day for them to reopen the next as community housing. The initiative heralded an international deinstitutionalisation movement, placing holistic emphasis on the person at the centre of the illness, rather than the disease in isolation.

The movement has informed mental health policy locally since the NSW government's 1983 Richmond Report and in the ensuing decades resulted in the salt-and-pepper establishment of both temporary and long-term accommodation in small, shared-room boarding houses, located in and among the typical houses of suburbia.

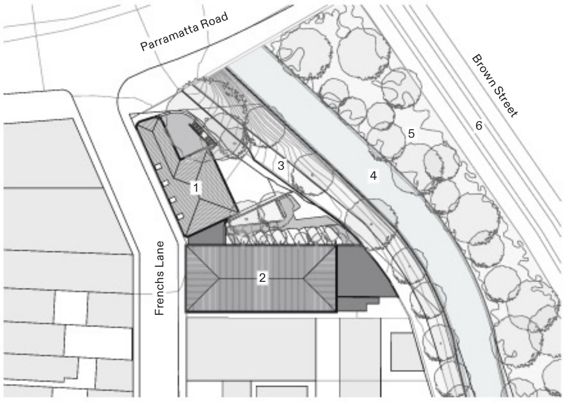
Over the years of working in these environments, Nielssen developed ideas for collective housing that inform the Habilis model, a diverse collection of 21 serviced apartments for individual residents across two levels, within a secure perimeter and with dedicated clinic and communal spaces. At that dwelling density, it becomes viable for the facility to be supported by a live-in caretaker and an on-site mental health social worker, with attendance by a nurse practitioner and a psychiatrist.

Commissioned in 2020, Collins and Turner developed a lithe transformation that worked with the inherent spatial relationships of the site to retain and reuse the existing furniture showroom and warehouse buildings. The street character of the entrance facade is largely blank, but with a pleasing composition of material textures. There is great economy in the detailing – skilful architecture confidently deployed, with green custom-orb roofing, fine horizontal datum flashings and cladding riffing on the green roof of the original warehouse.

The vehicle entrance is cleverly detailed with a large sliding gate in vertical steel palisade tube. The pedestrian entrance is well integrated within the larger facade motif that provides for a finely calibrated screen to define enclosure while enabling the ground-floor communal spaces and the public street to enliven one another.

The 21 dwellings are built to the Liveable Housing Design Standard and arranged in a canted, L-shaped plan. Ground-floor apartments are accessed through garden thresholds from the front, in the manner of terrace housing. Otherwise, the perimeter circulation path is on the upper level and travels from outside to inside with no discernible thresholds, widening to small communal terraces that enjoy aspect over the canal and offer capacity for the informal interactions that are crucial for building community.

The ground-floor open space is in two distinct parts. The first centres on a small communal table and barbecue in the lovely emerging gardens designed by Gallagher Studio. The second is the undercroft parking area, which includes a large vehicle turning circle and two exposed car stackers. These were a requirement of the planning approval, unneeded by Habilis, and will ultimately be removed. Devoid of vehicles, the ambiguous space at the locus of the plan suggests a potent future. In this generous, shaded


Parramatta Road
Brown Street
Frenchs Lane
1
2
3
4
5
6
0 5 20 m

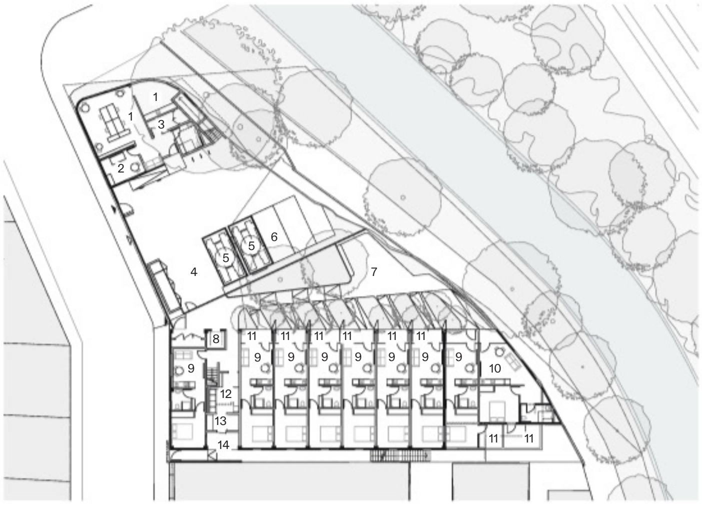
Site plan
1:1500

(SITE PLAN)

1 Building A
2 Building B
3 Bike and pedestrian path
4 Hawthorne Canal
5 Cadigal Reserve
6 Light rail

(FLOOR PLANS)

1 Office
2 Consult room
3 Medication store
4 Loading bay
5 Two-car stacker
6 Accessible car space
7 Landscaped common area
8 Lift
9 Clinical accommodation
10 Accessible clinical accommodation
11 Terrace
12 Laundry/cleaners
13 Plant
14 Egress
15 Balcony
16 Caretaker's unit
17 Circulation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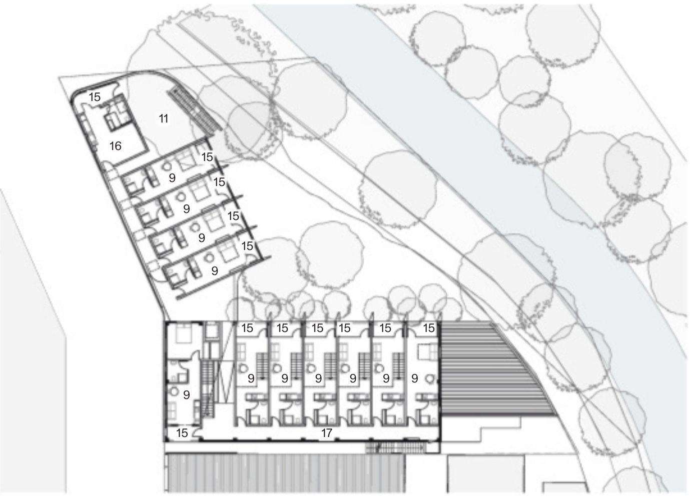
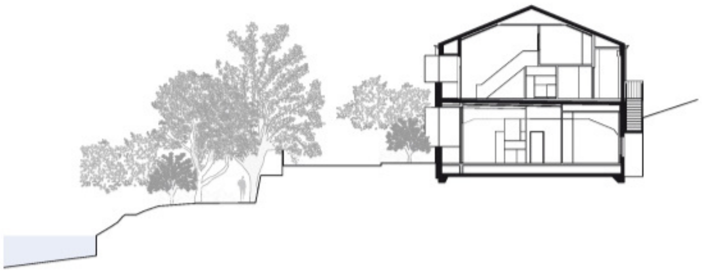
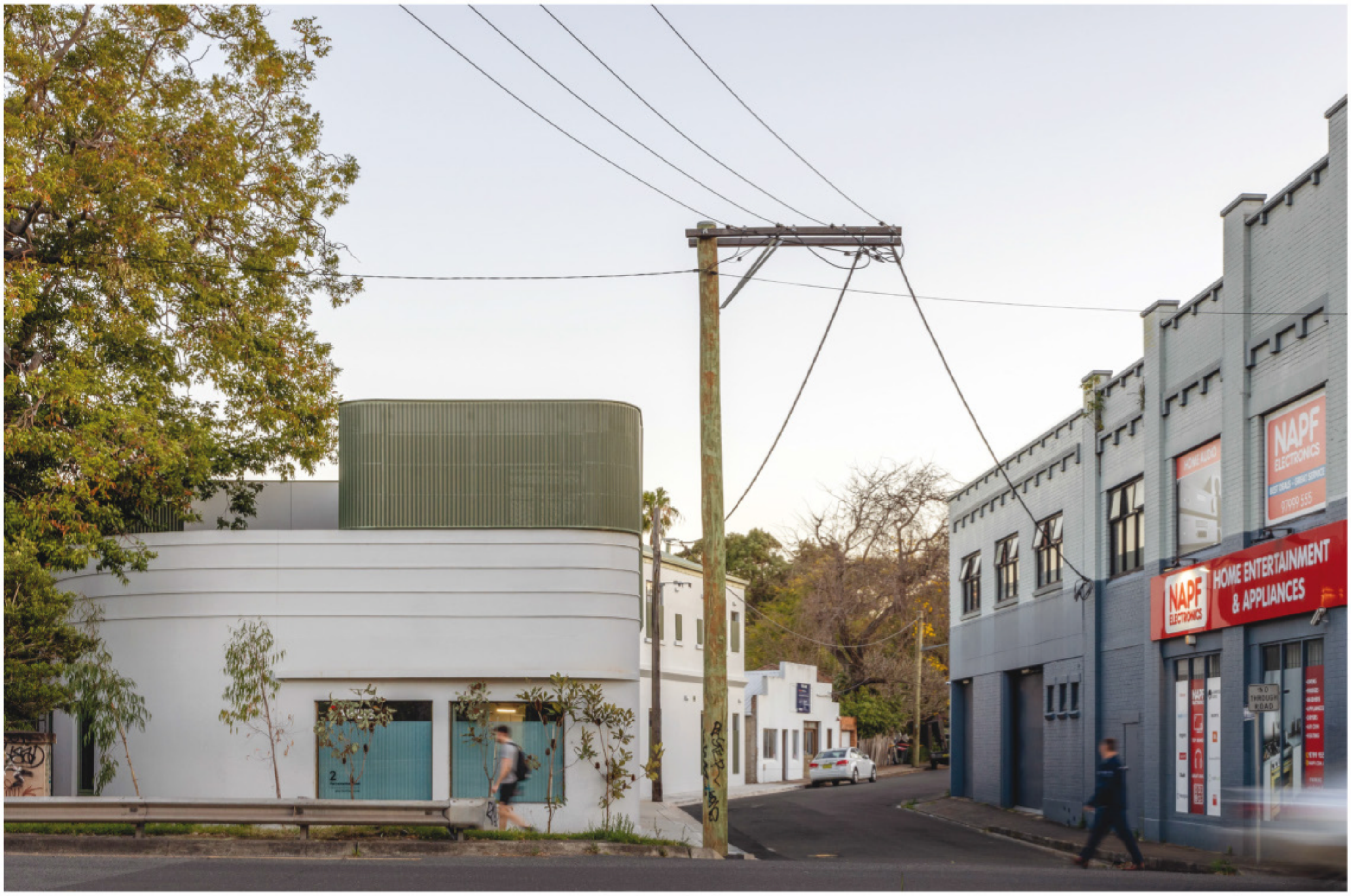
Ground floor plan
1:750

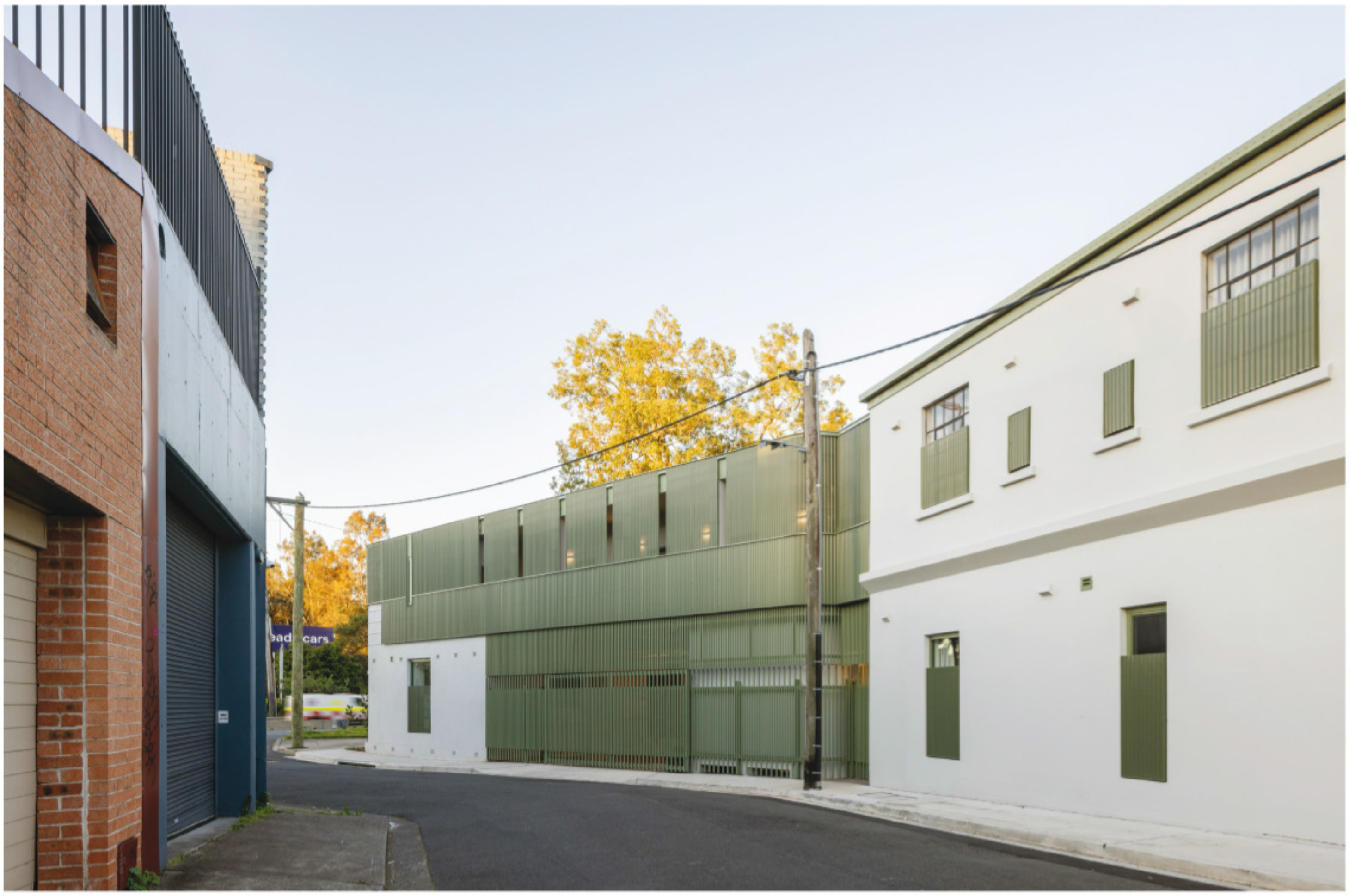

15
16
11
9
15
17

Level one floor plan
1:750



Section
1:500


NAPF ELECTRONICS
HOME ENTERTAINMENT & APPLIANCES
NO THROUGH ROAD



space on the day of our visit we find Linda, a social worker, and Luke, a resident, having a smoke on chairs brought out from the clinic.

Luke tells us of his circumstances and those of others here – time spent homeless, whether sleeping rough or in shelters. He explains the different ways he strategically accesses networks of support within the neighbourhood: the local gym, Centrelink, subsidised groceries – a basket for $20.

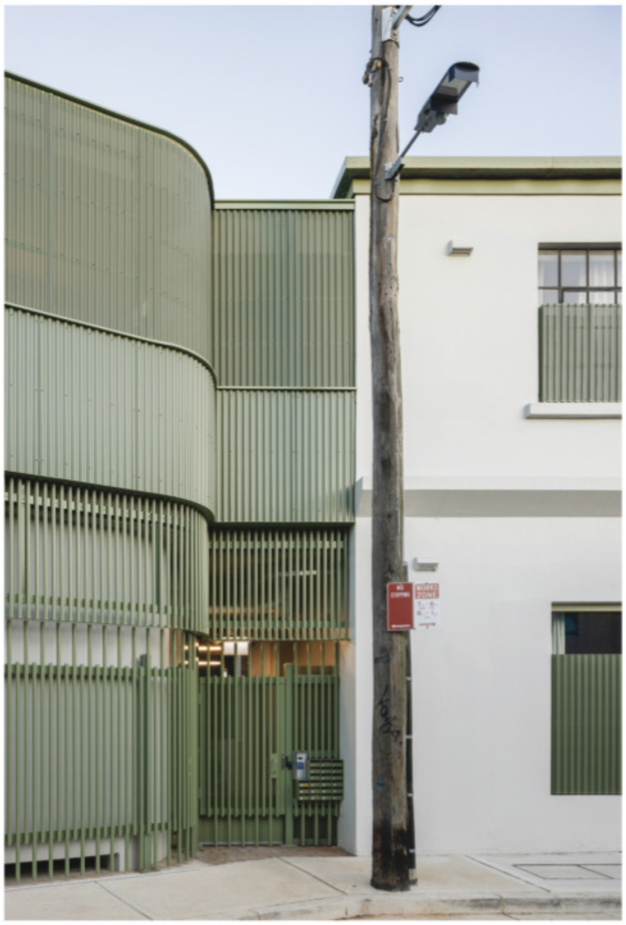
His dwelling is on the upper floor, closest to the canal and furthest from the road. It is a quiet, compact space. There is a small kitchen. Cutlery and crockery all new. The unit is filled with a lounge, big TV and a drum kit. It reminds me of the tenuous domesticity of my first flat. It's a great space, a haven, and he happily shows us around.

Despite the inevitable difficulties of a COVID-era design and construction procurement process, beguiling details abound. Of the many, two seem most representative of the project. The first is the height of the simple fibre-cement-clad threshold ledge at the interface of each garden apartment and the adjacent landscaped communal spaces. It offers a private space for a small chair and table with a view, when seated, to the riverside canopy and sky beyond. But standing, the ledge becomes a place to lean, elbows resting, perfectly calibrated for a chat with a passer-by. Acts of domesticity rely on these deft armatures, which accumulate to become the background that facilitates a good life.

The second is, in a way, the opposite: an unfortunately excessive one-metre stair width that impacts the already-narrow living area in the otherwise wonderful two-storey dwellings. Different operational funding mechanisms required strict compliance with the Liveable Housing Design Standard, and so an overly wide minimum stair width. Hopefully, elements of this standard will be amended to enable performance solutions so architects as good as these can calibrate appropriate outcomes.

Towards the end of our visit, Linda shows us a large set of cupboards in the shared common area; they are full to the brim with crockery, board games, bedding, the foundations of domestic life collected from friends of the facility and ready for new residents. The physical manifestation of care these quotidian objects represent is strangely arresting, and it strikes me that this Potemkin Village is not a chimera, but a promise fulfilled.

— Andrew Scott practises architecture as a director of Panov Scott Architects, while also engaging reflectively in writing, building and teaching.



Architect Collins and Turner; Project team Penny Collins, Huw Turner, Barbara Lau, Andy Carlsen, David Janson; Builder Structure Australia; Project manager Neoscape; Structural engineers Structure Consulting Engineers; Mechanical, electrical, hydraulic and ESP engineers ACOR Consultants; BCA consultant Trevor R Howse and Associates; Landscape architect Gallagher Studio; Access consultant Inclusive Places

(PREVIOUS)	Access to sunlight, natural ventilation and views to the canopy and river create a home designed for domesticity, dignity and health.
(OPPOSITE TOP)	The site's existing furniture showroom and warehouse were retained, reused and transformed into a place of residence and care.
(OPPOSITE BOTTOM)	Green custom-orb roofing, fine horizontal datum flashings and cladding make reference to the green roof of the original warehouse.
(ABOVE)	The pedestrian entrance is integrated within the green screen, defining the enclosure while providing porosity that enables ground-floor spaces and the public street to connect.

Allunga Road Multi

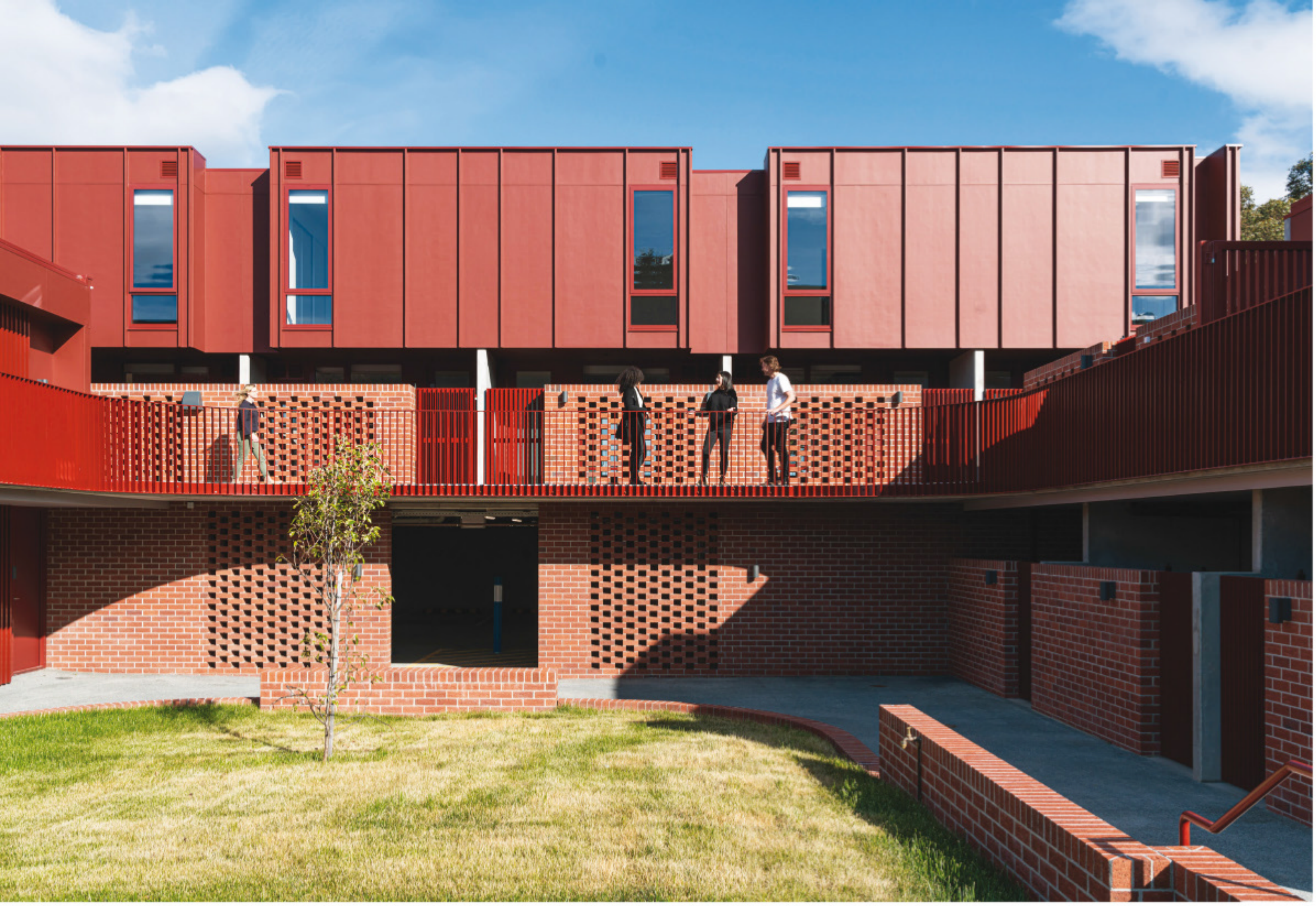
(COUNTRY)	Muwinina
(LOCATION)	Nipaluna/Hobart, Tas
(REVIEWER)	Emily Taylor
(PHOTOGRAPHER)	Matt Sansom

(ARCHITECT)

Preston Lane Architects

●

TYPE OF SUPPLY	Social housing
SITE AREA	2,072 m²
DWELLINGS IN PROJECT	18
DWELLINGS PREVIOUSLY ON SITE	8
DENSITY (DWELLINGS PER HECTARE)	86
CAR SPACES	17
HEIGHT (STOREYS)	3
CLOSEST PUBLIC TRANSPORT	<10 m



A set of dignified units in suburban Nipaluna/Hobart resonate with moments of welcome amenity, reminding us that social housing can enjoy just as much thoughtful design as its private counterpart.

“People are shocked when I tell them this is [social] housing; they are gobsmacked,” Lisa tells me.[1] Lisa lives in a two-bedroom unit at Allunga Road. The 18-unit medium-density development is a new venture for Loreto Community Housing, whose primary stock is brick-veneer single-detached dwellings in suburbs across Tasmania. Loreto entrusted Allunga Road’s design to Preston Lane Architects, a local practice with a reputation for quality high-end homes. “Gobsmacked” may not be the firm’s usual client feedback, but in this case, it is the highest praise.

Social and affordable housing is arguably the greatest test of an architect’s skill, but it is also where architects’ involvement can be most beneficial. With tight budgets, stringent maintenance requirements and an environment of frequent occupant turnover, it’s easy to see how social housing is often developed with soulless designs paired with bomb-proof, “clinical” material palettes. At Allunga Road, Preston Lane Architects embraced the challenge to deliver functionality balanced with beauty, in a responsible and restrained manner.

Allunga Road is located in Chigwell, one of Hobart’s northern suburbs that lies beyond what is colloquially known as the “Flannelette Curtain.” It has historically been considered a fairly rough suburb, one that I’d be advised to not walk around alone in, night or day. But Chigwell is on the up – it is experiencing growth, both in population and appeal, that can partly be attributed to the infamous Museum of Old and New Art, which shares the postcode. The location is a smart choice for a medium-density development by Loreto and the site’s landowner, Homes Tasmania, which also assisted with the project funding: land is still reasonably affordable here, shops and services are nearby and Glenorchy City Council’s strategic plans for the area show promise and foresight – encouraging medium-density housing along transport corridors, with emphasis on quality living, quality design, cultural diversity and urban vibrancy.

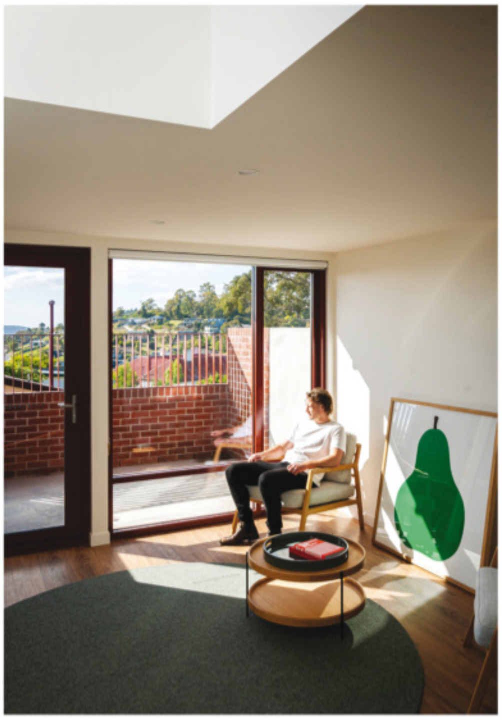
The site arrangement and expression of the buildings at Allunga Road is at once respectful to the existing context of detached suburban houses (for example, featuring red brick commonly used in the area), while pre-empting the future densification of the suburb. The clustering of 18 units into three main blocks, and the visual separation of the individual units’ roofs, walls and private balconies, all help to break up the development’s perceived mass when viewed from the street. The units themselves benefit from this arrangement: their private indoor spaces are all directed out, towards the views of the surrounding hills, which gives amenity to the interiors and adds a sense of expansiveness to these relatively compact units.

The units are accessed via a central communal courtyard, which is designed for resident safety, both perceived and actual. For instance, the walkways have generous widths and good visibility, giving residents agency in deciding how much they engage with others, as well as multiple exit points that offer a choice of pathways out of the site. Adding to the feeling of safety is the ambient, warm-toned lighting along the walkways, and filtered views to the living spaces of the units through the partially screened entrance courtyards.

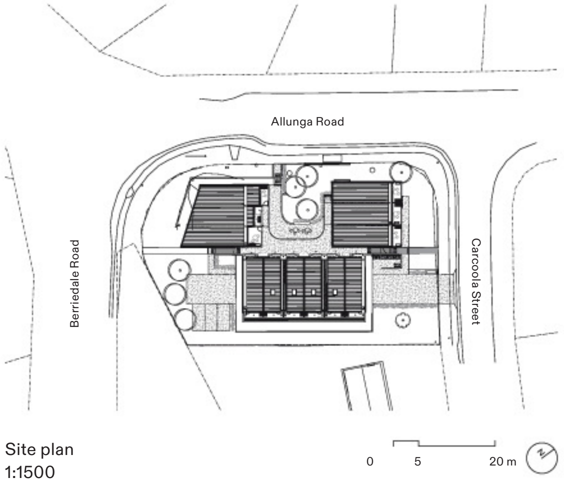
On my way to visit Lisa in her two-bedroom unit, I walk up the front steps onto the raised communal walk-way, then through her entrance courtyard, beyond the hit-and-miss brickwork and into her open-plan kitchen-living area. Lisa sits in her sun-filled lounge room, which she has thoughtfully furnished with couch, rug, cushions and lamps. She tells me she'd been collecting the furniture while waiting on the housing priority list. (At time of writing, the priority list – reserved for those facing homelessness, with serious health issues, or escaping family violence – has a wait time of more than one-and-a-half years.) Lisa is rebuilding her life from scratch, piece by piece, after leaving her previous home behind when she escaped her violent partner.

Lisa shows me all the features that she loves about her unit: how it has both a front and back courtyard, the back being more private and looking out to a view towards Hobart and the River Derwent; the colour palette; the generous storage spaces; and the "hidden" laundry – thoughtful details well considered by Preston Lane Architects and well executed by Lyden Builders.

Lisa's space is full of indoor plants which, after just four months of living here, are thriving. "I grew all of these from cuttings. They love all the light in here," she says. She points to the generously sized light well overhead, with daylight spilling down through the two levels from a skylight above. I must admit I had been surprised by the light shaft – I didn't expect this level of amenity from a large-scale community housing provider, considering the necessary scrutiny of every dollar on such projects. Daniel Lane of Preston Lane Architects admits they had to fight for the light wells to be included in the build. "We felt the amenity of having generous daylight deep in the centre of the homes was worth it," he says.



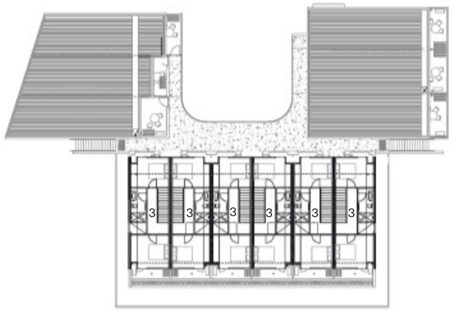
(PREVIOUS)	Allunga Road's red brick cladding is respectful of the surrounding suburb's context while its scale pre-empts the future densification of the suburb.
(OPPOSITE)	The central courtyard is designed for resident safety and agency, with wide walkways, open visibility and multiple paths of exit.
(LEFT)	A rear terrace and generous light well allow sunlight deep into the centre of the compact units.


Allunga Road
Berriedale Road
Carcoola Street
0
5
20 m
N

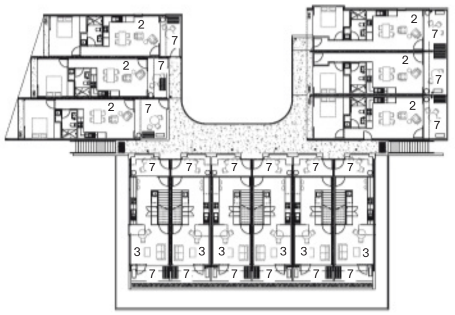
Site plan
1:1500

(FLOOR PLANS)

1	Courtyard
2	One bed apartment
3	Two bed apartment
4	Carpark
5	Bin store
6	Communal area
7	Terrace



Level two floor plan
1:750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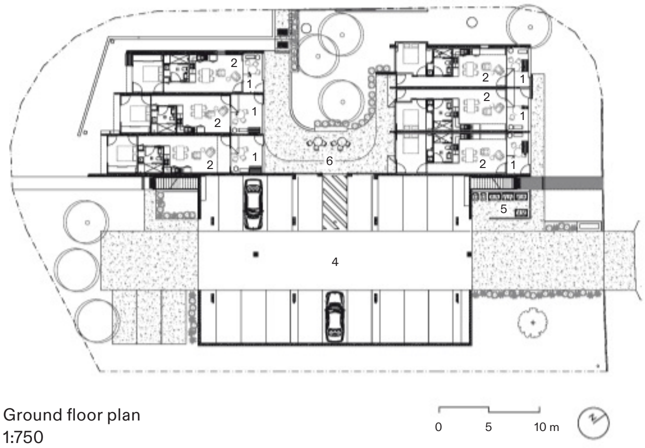
Level one floor plan
1:750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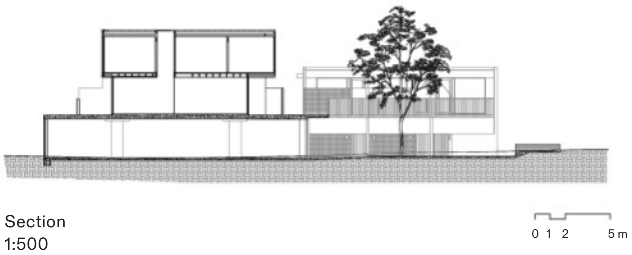
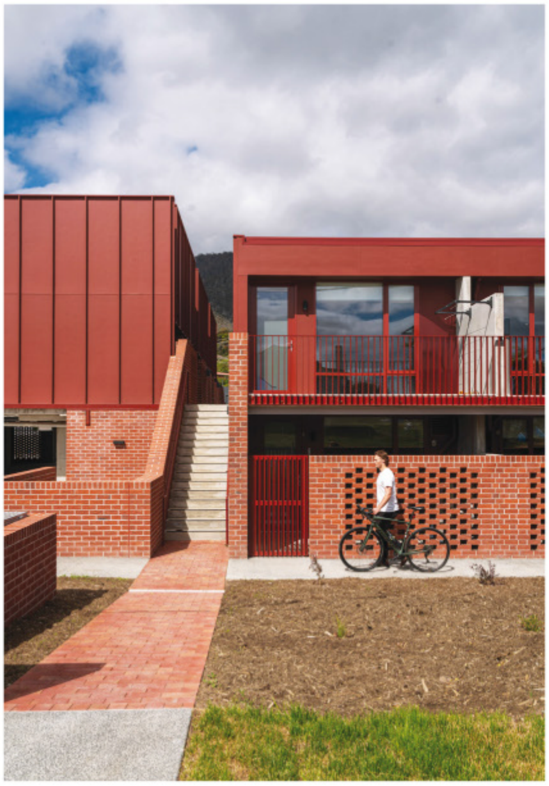
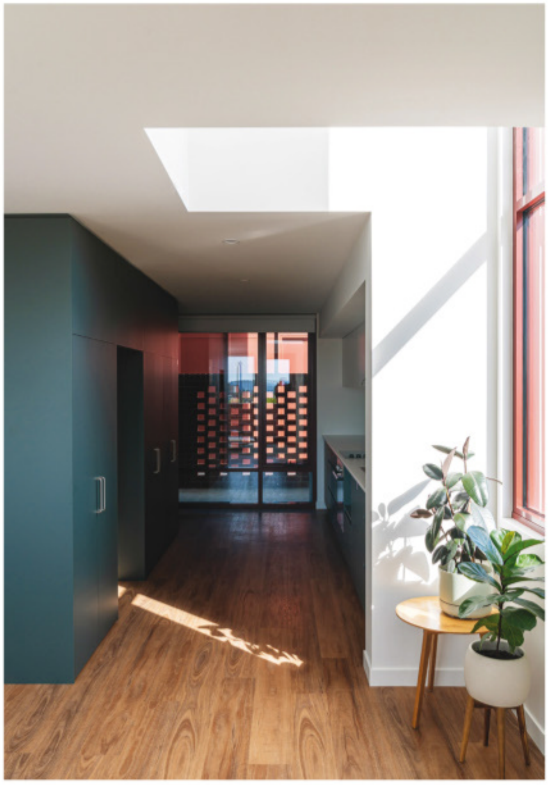
Ground floor plan
1:750



Section
1:500





(TOP) The clustering of units across three main blocks helps break up the perception of mass when viewed from the street.

(BOTTOM) Private entry courtyards, partially screened with hit-and-miss brickwork, offer filtered views to communal spaces.

This is the crux of the challenge for architects designing social housing – they need to weigh up the cost-benefit of every design feature. Allunga Road's design and material palette is extremely restrained, often with economical materials put together in a thoughtful and elegant way (such as the painted cement sheet cladding being made special with timber strips placed over the panel joints). The light well is a little sense of luxury, which is extremely effective.

There's a question of what more could be done to centre social-housing residents' needs in developments such as these. During my visit, I notice a small detail of Lisa's unit that I can't ignore: she has added frosted film to her glazed balcony door, which was previously clear glass without a blind or curtain for privacy. I query her on this and she confirms my suspicion: she is afraid of being seen at night. This is common for domestic violence survivors and is one example of why social housing developers and architects could benefit from a co-design process that is informed by people with lived experiences of such trauma. Trauma-informed design is an emerging field addressing this issue globally.[2]

As suggested by Lisa's gobsmacked visitors, Allunga Road could easily pass as private market housing. This hints at the way social housing could go in Australia: quality housing, designed by architects, that expresses nothing about the income of the residents who live there. It's already happening elsewhere in the world. Last year I visited Denmark, where around 20 percent of the total housing stock is under a social housing model.[3] This housing is designed by architects, to a high standard that is tenure-blind. A Danish resident explained to me: "I grew up in social housing but didn't know this until I was an adult. This is because all housing is of a good quality!" While acknowledging the cultural and political differences between our social housing sectors, there are lessons we can learn about quality design for people at risk of homelessness.

Allunga Road is a step in the right direction for Australia's social housing sector, demonstrating the value architects can bring to dignified housing solutions. It reminds us, as the UN Human Settlements Programme explains, "Housing is more than just a roof; it's the opportunity for better lives and a better future." I ask Lisa if she is happy living here. "I hope to be here for a long time," she says. "I'm wanting to settle down." Like her plants grown from cuttings, Lisa is rebuilding her life. Allunga Road is more than a home to her, it's a fresh start, a place to heal and, in time, thrive.

— Emily Taylor is an associate at Core Collective Architects, based in Nipaluna/Hobart. Emily co-designed the trauma-informed Isabel and Elsie: Homes Designed to Nurture Women and Children's Wellbeing and Recovery from Homelessness, which was shortlisted for the 2024 ArchitectureAu Award for Social Impact.

(FOOTNOTES)

(1) Name changed for privacy.

(2) See traumainformedhousing.poah.org, and the Hope Street (UK) case study by Snug Architects.

(3) Sidsel Grimstad et al., "What Australia can learn from European affordable co-operative rental housing models," Business Council of Co-operatives and Mutuals, 17 October 2024, apo.org.au/node/328708.

Architect Preston Lane Architects; Project team Daniel Lane, Ryan Gates; Builder Lyden Builders; Project manager Loreto Community Housing; Structural, civil and hydraulic engineer Aldanmark Consulting Engineers; Electrical and mechanical engineer Cova Thinking; ESD consultant Red Sustainability; Building surveyor Holdfast Consulting and Construction

Mundingburra Housing

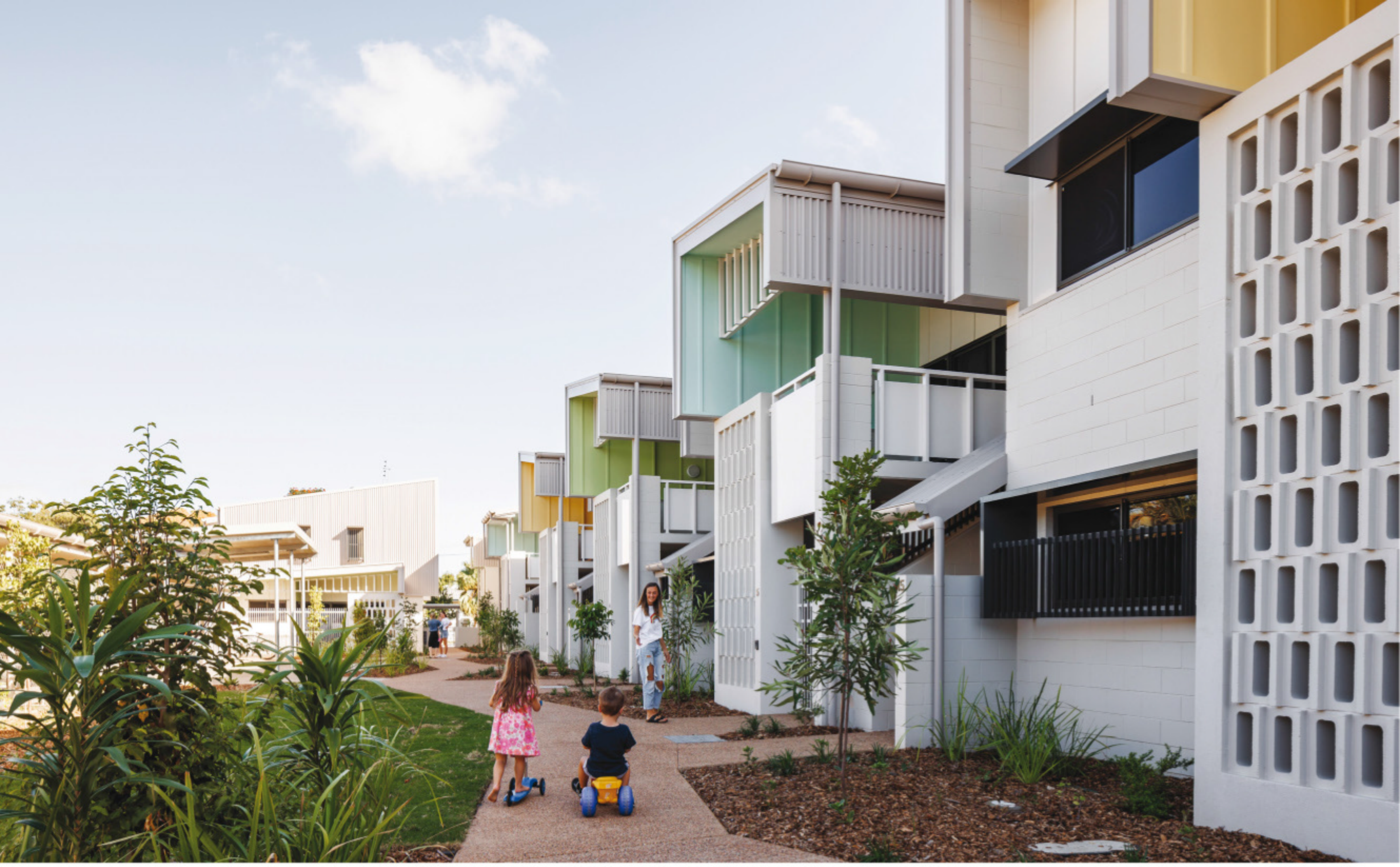
(COUNTRY)	Wulgurukaba
(LOCATION)	Townsville, Qld
(REVIEWER)	Helen Norrie
(PHOTOGRAPHER)	Andrew Rankin

(ARCHITECT)

Counterpoint Architecture

●

TYPE OF SUPPLY	Social housing
SITE AREA	3,214 m²
DWELLINGS IN PROJECT	18
DWELLINGS PREVIOUSLY ON SITE	4
DENSITY (DWELLINGS PER HECTARE)	56
CAR SPACES	18
HEIGHT (STOREYS)	2
CLOSEST PUBLIC TRANSPORT	40 m



An exemplar project for Queensland's Social Housing Design Guideline, this small-scale development presents a civic response that balances community and individual identity.

Like most places in Australia, Townsville's primary mode of residential development involves the continued expansion of suburbs on the periphery of the city. While the problems associated with expanding cities – car dependence, disconnection from services and environmental impacts – are clear in metropolitan centres, these issues are less apparent in the regions. On the surface, it seems reasonable to keep building new outer suburbs when the average journey across town is less than 20 minutes, so there is no perceived need to restrict the city boundaries. Consequently, attempts to shift the status quo of housing choices are often met with resistance, with one of the key concerns being how other models might impact amenity and existing neighbourhood character.

The Office of the Queensland Government Architect (OQGA) has developed strategies to facilitate the development of quality housing that challenges the norm. In 2017, recognising the importance of providing exemplars, the Queensland government created the Density and Diversity Done Well competition, inviting proposals that explored the "missing middle" between highrise housing and individual freestanding homes. Drawing from the ideas in this competition, the OQGA, with the Department of Housing and Public Works' Social Housing Delivery Office, committed to undertake a number of social housing demonstration projects across the state.

Townsville-based practice Counterpoint Architecture was selected to create one of these – a seemingly modest project of transforming three allotments in Mundingburra, one of Townsville's most established suburbs, into a small-scale residential development. Development came amid ongoing scrutiny of housing in the city, so the stakes were high for this project to demonstrate the advantages of new approaches. For Mundingburra Housing, Counterpoint Architecture created a series of strategies that mediated the scale of the new building and extended the character of the neighbourhood while introducing a new residential typology.

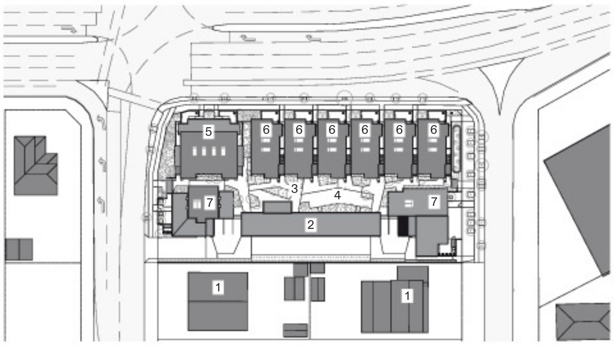
At first glance, the project reads as a gentle increase in density, with a series of two-storey dwellings matching the scale and complementing the character of the neighbours. A closer look reveals that the project stealthily provides a huge increase in residential density on the previous site. A total of 18 dwellings now sit across the site's original three residential allotments. A series of six double-storey row houses present along the main road, each containing two two-bedroom apartments, while a double duplex containing four two-bedroom dwellings sits to the north-west of the site. Located on the east and west side streets are two four-bedroom houses (one double storey, the other single), which scale down the development to create continuity with the existing streetscape.

The original residential allotments were home to 10 to 15 people – the new 18 dwellings can accommodate 60 to 75, an increase of up to 650 percent.

A considered site strategy provides a clear sense of order and legibility. Vehicles enter from the east, along a driveway on the southern boundary, and are parked in a long, shared carport. Bin storage is tucked into either end of this service zone, with bicycle storage nearby. A shady, landscaped garden in the centre of the site provides both the main entry and the "backyard" for the apartments. A pedestrian path leads from both side streets and the carport, providing access to the screened courtyard entries of the ground-floor apartments and the recessed stairs to the upper-level dwellings. The communal garden visually connects with the extended space of the neighbouring backyards, with endemic planting providing a changing landscape of colour and fragrance from season to season.

The simple layouts of the two-bedroom units maximise natural ventilation, capturing the south-east wind and north-east sea breezes to provide passive cooling. Bedrooms are located to the north and south, with a shared bathroom in between. Within the open-plan living space of these units, the kitchens are placed on the northern half closest to the main road, with the lounge located to the south, looking out to the garden. Each apartment has an outdoor room to the north and south, extending the living space and creating a privacy gradient between inside and outside. This allows for the sliding glass doors at either end of the unit to be left open to facilitate passive cooling, without compromising internal privacy. Doors and windows are aligned to promote cross-ventilation, and ceiling fans in indoor and outdoor spaces enhance air movement. Screening to the outdoor rooms provides a comfortable and semi-hidden space that facilitates passive surveillance of the spaces beyond. The extra expense of an additional outdoor private space to the north is justified by

(PREVIOUS)	Mundingburra Housing reads as a work of gentle densification, but closer analysis reveals it provides an increase in residential density of up to 650 percent.
(LEFT)	A central garden is both main entrance and backyard for residences and offers shade, communal amenity and visual connection.
(RIGHT)	Pedestrian paths provide access to the screened courtyard entries of the ground-floor apartments and the recessed stairs to the upper-level dwellings.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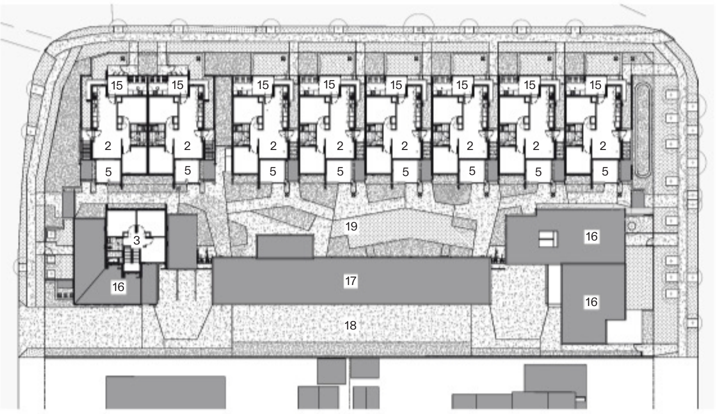
Site plan
1:2000

(SITE PLAN)

1 Adjacent residence
2 Carport roof
3 Pedestrian access spine
4 Common open space
5 Four dwellings
6 Two dwellings
7 One dwelling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Level one floor plan
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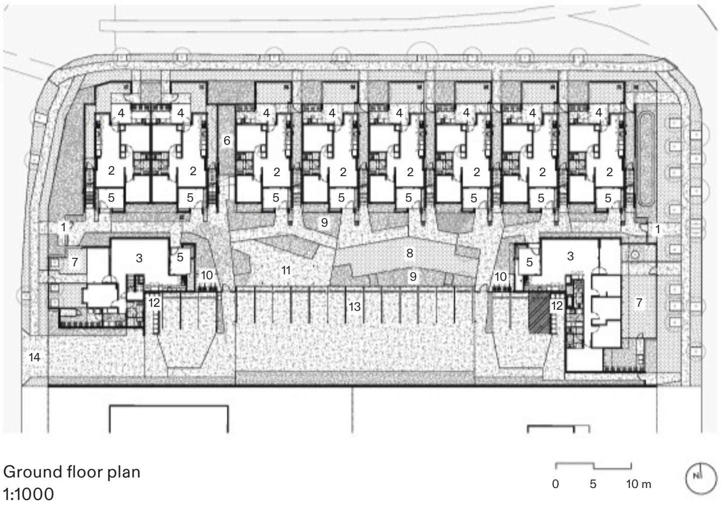
(FLOOR PLANS)

1 Entry gate
2 Two-bed dwelling
3 Four-bed dwelling
4 Entry/utility
5 Terrace
6 Landscape breezeway
7 Private open space
8 Common open space
9 Garden
10 Bike racks
11 Covered area
12 Bin store
13 Carparking
14 Entry/exit
15 Utility
16 Roof
17 Carport roof
18 Carpark below
19 Common space below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Ground floor plan
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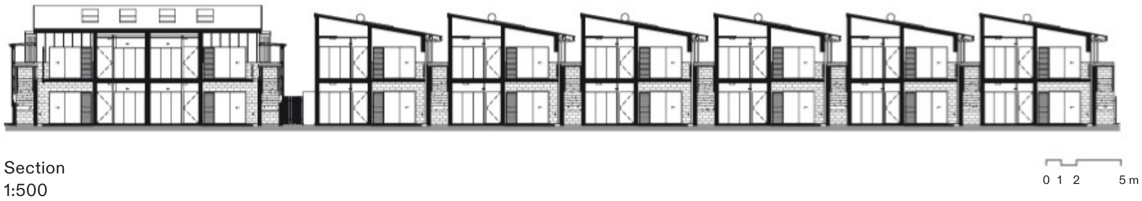

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the inclusion of a laundry with covered drying space, a necessity in the rainy tropical summers.

The two four-bedroom houses provide a diversity of accommodation. A similar plan diagram to that of the units is used, with open-planned living rooms complemented by a pair of screened outdoor rooms that extend the internal living space and connect with the street on one side and the communal garden on the other. Of these, the house to the east has one of its bedrooms on the ground floor, along with a separate courtyard, providing an ideal environment for semi-independent, intergenerational living.

Tectonically, the buildings draw on the architectural vocabulary of the postwar tropical, domestic vernacular – skillion roofs, blockwork, bespoke metal gates and fibre-cement and metal cladding. Screened verandahs and courtyards of breeze block and battens, with solid infill panels and angled screens, break down the scale of the buildings and create a buffer to the busy main road. The deep soffits are painted in a delicate rainbow of complementary pale green, blue, yellow and orange, creating a sense of identity for each building. On the southern side, the coloured soffits, screens and recessed entries create an articulated edge to the communal backyard. Residents have begun to layer the edges further, adding screening and planting to individualise spaces to suit their personal needs.

Driving along the adjacent main road, the Mundingburra development provides a welcome addition to the street-scape and neighbourhood. The scale and detail of the project give a delightful contrast to the aging commercial premises that dominate the strip. The strategy of orienting the dwellings away from the main road, towards the shady southern garden, is balanced by the articulated northern facades, with the design allowing the ground-floor apartments to provide activation at street level. The site selection reinforces the ambition of the project to maximise the amenity of social housing, as it is adjacent to shops, schools, parks and the Ross River.

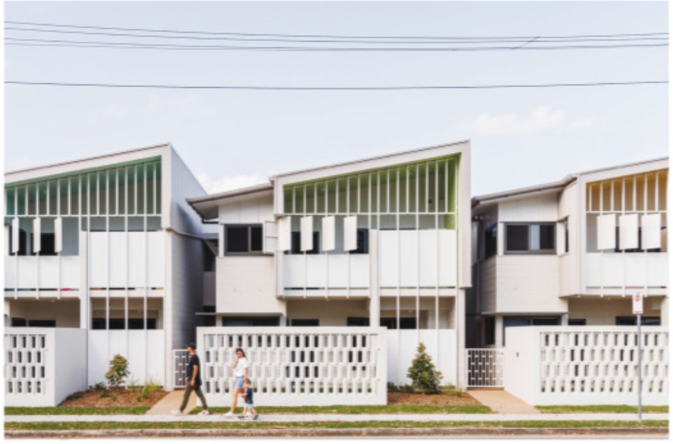
Throughout the process, Counterpoint Architecture worked closely with the Queensland Department of Housing and Public Works to understand the programmatic possibilities of the project. Its work was supported by the various design guidelines developed by the OQGA and department, such as the Q Design manual. It also contributed to them: Mundingburra is highlighted as an exemplar project in the Social Housing Design Guideline, a toolkit providing clear benchmarks for best practice social housing design.

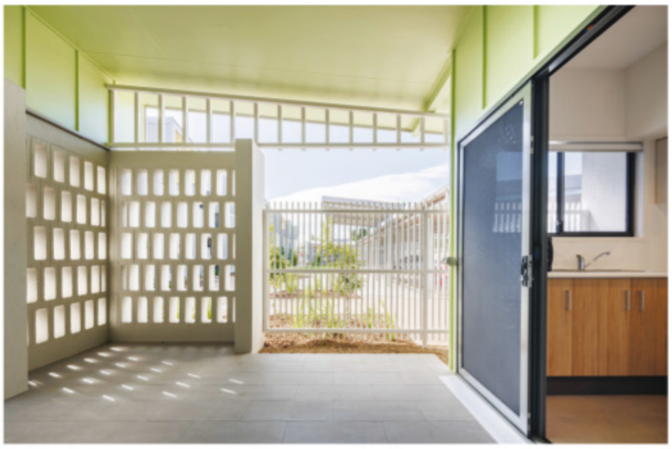
These guides provide a framework for excellence, supporting the agency of the architect to facilitate good design outcomes. The process of generating ideas through competition and then allowing architects to draw on and develop these ideas further is also a very effective model for exploring housing innovation.

With Mundingburra Housing, Counterpoint Architecture shows how the best design can grow with the right supports in place. It presents a strongly civic response, balancing individual identity and a sense of community, and demonstrates the advantages of alternative models that are so critical in the current housing crisis.

— Helen Norrie is an academic in the School of Architecture and Design at the University of Tasmania, and the founder of the Regional Urban Studies Laboratory, a collaborative urban design research project that directly engages with local councils and communities to examine urban spatial, temporal and social issues in small towns and cities.

Architect Counterpoint Architecture; Project team Mark Kennedy, Zammi Rohan, Nicola Inskip, Terry Hiette, Alastair Walker, Nicola Blakey, Daniel Amante, Peter Muller, Tess Grace, Danielle Gross; Builder Ellis Developments; Project manager QBuild; Structural, civil and traffic engineer Northern Consulting Engineers; Electrical engineer GT Consultants; Hydraulic engineer Parker Hydraulic Consulting Group; Landscape design RPS Group; Building surveyor Building Certifiers Queensland; Acoustic consultant WSP; Energy efficiency consultant Star Busters; Quantity surveyor Mitchell Brandtman; Certification to design development Devcert





(TOP) Mundingburra housing mediates the scale of the new buildings and extends the character of the neighbourhood while introducing a new residential typology.

(BOTTOM) Screened outdoor rooms extend internal living spaces and facilitate passive cooling without compromising privacy.

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Pictured: Jing Liu at 2025 Australian Architecture Conference | Sydney Opera House | Photographer: Maclay Heriot

DOSSIER — What are architects doing about the housing crisis?

Australia is in an era that continues to commodify housing, leading to the exclusion of many demographics from this human right. Within this complex and highly politicised crisis, how are architects contributing to solutions that shift the canon towards a more equitable future? In this dossier, architects and experts discuss our path forward, asking us to critique the status quo, learn from built exemplars and retain our resilience when advocating for change that benefits all.

(WRITER) Brendan Coates

State of the nation: Tackling Australia’s housing crisis

Brendan Coates, housing and economic security program director at Grattan Institute, provides an overview of the crisis in Australia and outlines how the built environment industry can contribute to the pursuit of affordable and desirable housing.

Australia’s housing problem has been building for decades. House prices have risen faster than incomes across Australia: in the early 2000s, house prices were about four times the median income. Today, the typical home costs about eight times the median income across most capital cities, and nearly 10 times in Sydney.

But housing has become even more expensive since the pandemic. Rents have risen sharply across Australia – by 80 percent in Perth, more than 50 percent in Brisbane and Adelaide, and roughly 20 percent in Sydney and Melbourne – in the past four years.[1] Many vulnerable renters are struggling to keep a roof over their heads.

And the growing gap between the housing “haves” and “have nots” is also worsening wealth inequality. The prospects for a more egalitarian Australia largely rest on whether we can make housing more affordable.

Housing is expensive because we haven’t built enough of it

Worsening housing affordability is a problem with many causes. Lower interest rates and strong migration over recent decades have both played a role; so has a lack of new social housing.

But the heart of the problem is the fact we just haven’t built enough homes to meet the needs of a growing population, especially homes in places where people most want to live – that is, in established suburbs close to jobs, transport, schools and other amenities.

Heading into the COVID-19 pandemic, Australia had just over 400 dwellings per 1,000 people, which was among the least housing stock per person in the developed world. Australia is also one of only four OECD countries where the amount of housing per person went backwards over the past two decades.

And Australia’s two biggest cities, Sydney and Melbourne, are some of the least dense for their size in the world. Melbourne’s population density is roughly half that of Toronto; Sydney’s is just three quarters, in the area two to 10 kilometres from the city centre.

Stringent planning controls have stopped us building the homes we need

The shortage of housing in Australia is largely a failure of housing policy. Australia’s land-use planning rules are highly prescriptive and complex. And the frameworks and processes that dictate what gets built where are hugely biased against change.

For example, nearly half of all residential land in Melbourne is zoned for three storeys or less, and 77 percent of all residential-zoned land in Sydney is zoned R2 – low-density residential – which typically permits single homes only.

These rules reflect the politics of planning. Older and wealthier residents of well-located suburbs generally prefer their neighbourhoods to stay the same – and they get an outsized say. Whereas the people who might live in new housing in desirable suburbs, were it to be built, don’t have a voice.

This results in “missing middles”: hectares of prime inner-city land, close to jobs and transport, rising barely taller than two stories. And the populations of swathes of affluent suburbs in our biggest cities – precisely the places so many Australians want to live – are declining.

Allowing greater density would make housing cheaper

This is not what most Australians want. It is a myth that most Australians want a quarter-acre (or 1,000-square-metre) block. Many would prefer a townhouse, semi-detached dwelling or apartment in an inner or middle suburb, rather than a house on the city fringe.

In 2021, townhouses, apartments and semi-detached dwellings made up 44 percent of Sydney’s dwelling stock and 32 percent of Melbourne’s, up from about 39 percent and 27 percent, respectively, in 2011. This is still well short of the 59 percent and 52 percent respectively that residents say they want.

Urban infill could supply a lot of the new housing needed for a growing population while giving Australians more choice over where they live, and upzoning for more housing in established suburbs would make housing cheaper. The NSW Productivity and Equality Commission estimates that a 10 percent increase in housing supply – that is, over and above the level needed to match population growth – would lower housing costs by 25 percent.[2]

This isn’t merely theory. In 2016, Auckland, a city of 1.5 million, rezoned about three quarters of its suburban area to promote more dense housing. Researchers later found that the policy had boosted the housing stock by up to 4 percent. About three-quarters of the extra housing built was two- and three-storey duplexes and townhouses scattered across the city.

That extra housing reduced rent for two- and three-bedroom dwellings by at least 14 percent, compared to if the rezoning hadn’t happened, with the biggest fall in rents among cheaper dwellings.[3]

Auckland shows that planning systems must support much more zoned capacity than might be needed. Before the reform, central Auckland had zoned capacity for extra housing of about 1.5 times the existing population. Yet there was still a housing shortage, because much of that extra zoned capacity was in places where it wasn't economic to build.

Urban density, if done well, can also add to neighbourhood amenity while preserving local green space. As the NSW Productivity and Equality Commission noted, "Several cities with similar populations but higher densities – such as Vancouver, Toronto and Vienna – outrank Sydney, Melbourne, and Brisbane on quality-of-life measures."[4]

Building more housing in established suburbs is also cheaper for state governments. Infrastructure Victoria estimates that it costs between two and four times less to service a dwelling in an established suburb with infrastructure than it does for a new home on the suburban fringe.

And meeting our emissions-reduction goals would become easier if our cities became denser rather than continuing to sprawl further outwards.

The policy winds are shifting

The good news is that change is afoot. The 2025 federal election was the first election where gen Z and millennials outnumbered boomers in every state and territory. And they, more so than their parents, seem to understand that housing will only get more affordable in Australia if we build a lot more of it.

State governments in Victoria and New South Wales are acting by upzoning to allow more homes to be built in established suburbs of Melbourne and Sydney. The Victorian government's train and tram activity centre program will upzone scarce inner-city land around 60 transport hubs across Melbourne, and the NSW government's Transport Oriented Development program will do the same around 45 precincts in Sydney.

Victoria's Townhouse and Low-Rise Code, and the Low and Mid-Rise Housing Policy in NSW, will permit gentler density across Melbourne and Sydney, especially in the form of two- and three-storey townhouses, which are typically cheaper to build than multistorey apartment buildings. These reforms have the potential to unlock hundreds of thousands of extra homes in the coming decades in both cities, with some of the best infrastructure, amenities and public spaces.

Opinion polls in both NSW and Victoria suggest reforms are popular with the broader public, though state governments will need to hold the line in the face of opposition from those residents who don't want more homes near their own. A lack of public confidence in the quality of what gets built also makes it harder to create the housing we so desperately need. But more housing doesn't have to come at the expense of good design: the NSW Housing Pattern Book, for example, showcases high-quality, architect-designed plans for medium-density developments which will be made publicly available for developers and subject to a faster approval pathway.

Housing will become cheaper still if we can improve our capacity to build more of it: by supporting innovative new methods in housing construction; by growing our local construction workforce and bolstering it with more migrants with construction skills; and by supporting high-quality design that garners public support for more housing.

Scarce and expensive housing is a problem we really can fix, but only if we all work together to get more housing built where people most want to live.

— Brendan Coates is the Housing and Economic
Security program director at Grattan Institute.

(FOOTNOTES)

(1) Brendan Coates and Joey Moloney, "How to tackle the rental crisis," Grattan Institute, submission to the Senate Standing Committees on Community Affairs, 18 September 2023, grattan.edu.au/news/how-to-tackle-the-rental-crisis.

(2) "Building more homes where people want to live," NSW Productivity and Equality Commission, May 2023, productivity.nsw.gov.au/building-more-homes-where-people-want-to-live.

(3) Ryan Greenaway-McGrevy, "Causes and Consequences of Zoning Reform in Auckland", *Cityscape: A Journal of Policy Development and Research*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2023, huduser.gov/portal/periodicals/cityscape/vol26num2/ch20.pdf.

(4) "Building more homes where people want to live," 22.

Dwellings per 1,000 people, year 2000 and 2021 or latest

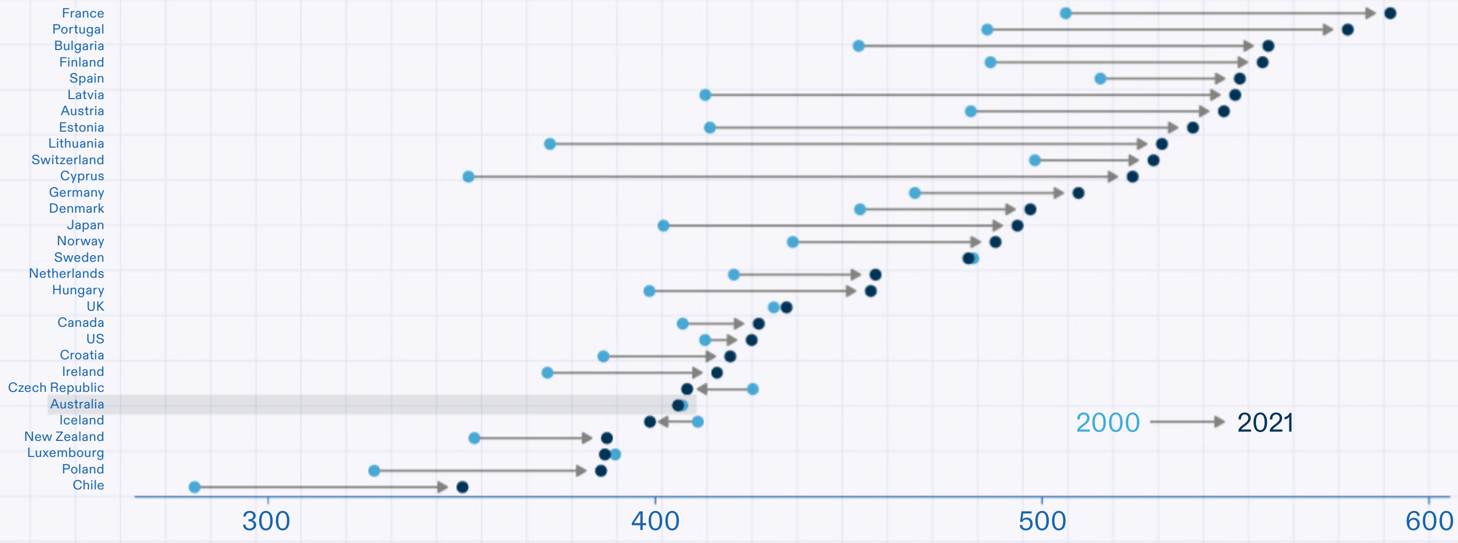

Figure 1: Figures are for total occupied and unoccupied dwellings. Data for 2021 series refer to: 2021 for Australia; 2020 for Austria, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Ireland, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Sweden, UK, and US; and 2018 for all others. Data for 2000 series refer to: 1998 for Italy; 2001 for Australia, Austria, Bulgaria, Canada, Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Luxembourg, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal and Spain; 2002 for Chile and Latvia; 2005 for Malta. Sources: OECD Affordable Housing Database, ABS 2021 Census.

(MODERATOR) Sarah Buckeridge

Developing policy: top-down and bottom-up approaches

●

Clear communication, cross-disciplinary collaboration and evidence-based research play critical roles in rethinking housing solutions. Sarah Buckeridge talks to Damian Madigan and Diana Snape about the influence of community advocacy on government decisions, and vice versa.

(BELOW) (Top–bottom, left–right): Sarah Buckeridge, co-managing principal of Hayball; Diana Snape, principal design advisor with Government Architect NSW; and Damian Madigan, associate professor of architecture at the University of South Australia.

SARAH BUCKERIDGE *I'm interested in the importance of "top-down" and "bottom-up" advocacy approaches and how they influence each other. How might one approach shape built outcomes in a way the other cannot?*

DIANA SNAPE In my mind, they're closely intertwined, and both vital to the evolution of the built environment. However, they do different things. I would say that advocacy from the bottom up really drives political will where it's strong enough. What we affectionately call NIMBYism, for example, is one of the strongest bottom-up advocacy movements we've seen, whether we like it or not.

I also see advocacy through practice and evidence-based decision-making as a bottom-up approach, and it's definitely one that I've championed in my government roles. If we understand "top down" as meaning decision-making, I think it can either enable or disable built outcomes.

DAMIAN MADIGAN I think the top-down approach is the natural state of play within broad government decision-making – it's an approach that assumes that if we release land or set planning controls in motion, then the housing will fall out of that approach.

I think as architects, our natural approach to problem-solving is bottom-up: let's test and lean on the work we've done before and the lessons we've learned. Through a process of design and demonstration we affect change. I think we have this unnatural relationship between the way the system works from the top down and the way we, as architects, instinctively work from the bottom up. There will always be that tension in play.

Then there is the question of where the role of design falls in the process. The top-down approach suggests that if you get the framework and metrics right, then design comes along at the end to make it palatable for people. The architects' approach will be instead to start by using design to set the rules. Part of our advocacy has to be about getting people to understand that design can be brought into the process much earlier to develop top-down statutory approaches.

SB *Diana, we understand that developing housing policy occurs in Australia at local, state and federal levels. With an eye to reaching supply targets, how do you think we can distribute agency across the three levels of government?*

DS This is a tricky question, because if the housing crisis was only to do with housing policy, then the answer would be really different. Our agency as architects and indeed the agency of those three levels of government in the housing space is in constant flux. The introduction of a national housing accord in recent times is one of those more dramatic fluctuations, and certainly one of the more forceful top-down actions that we've seen.

SB *The political rhetoric on the housing crisis centres almost exclusively on numbers; quantity rather than quality dominates the mainstream conversation. As stewards of design quality in the built environment, we're presented with a huge challenge.*

Damian, in the specific case of the Bluefield housing model, which perhaps you'd define for us, what's the right balance between efficiency and agility, and can policy outline or define this?

DM The Bluefield model is a recognition that the established suburbs can no longer remain largely unchanged. The Bluefield approach is firstly a naming of those established suburbs to bring them into the conversation with green, brown and greyfields, and then a corresponding housing infill model that co-locates housing on a single family home allotment. It's based on a simple premise of allowing people to keep doing alterations and additions to houses but creating multiple houses on the site instead of just making single houses bigger or knocking down to rebuild.

This idea about quality is challenging because there is an assumption among policymakers and the public at large that there is an established quality to older suburbs, where houses are retained for their aesthetic quality and the contribution to streetscape and character, whether they're heritage listed or not. The conversation needs to start turning to metrics and the reality that in older suburbs we have larger houses with fewer people living in them. How do we allow for new residents to come in? How do we allow existing residents to move within their communities? If you love these areas and you enjoy their character, how do we create smaller offerings within them? And that's when the discussion shifts to quality.

DS It's interesting for me to hear Damian reflecting on this, because when I was working in Adelaide with the government architect, several community conversations leveraged his research, which enabled us to have different conversations and influence the way people were able to receive the policy work that we were putting forward.

The work that we're doing right now on the New South Wales Housing Pattern Book has some similarities to that Bluefield thinking, insofar as we are looking at patterns for attached dwellings, and infill development that can fit on constrained sites without waiting for consolidation of lots. It's a long, slow process from the conception of these ideas through to the design and delivery of the dwelling – and then there's also the time it takes for community perceptions to shift.

Reflecting on the role of architects within our team and particularly in state government, we're not producing a typical architectural product – for example with the pattern book, for which we've consulted with 17 architecture practices in the first tranche of patterns. I think that it's going to prove quite powerful in the way that people perceive what architects can do for the housing crisis. What we are able to do as a government client is open up a different opportunity for the practice of architecture and the intelligence of architects to contribute.

DM I think that comes back to the initial discussion around top down versus bottom up. If you can take your architectural knowledge, experience and skill and demonstrate that these new models, whether it's a pattern book or the new co-located land-use definition for South Australia … if you can demonstrate that the work is scalable, it then flips to being top down.

SB *I'd like to turn now towards advocacy. When UCLA City Lab founder Professor Dana Cuff addressed the Australian Institute of Architects' national conference in 2024, she described how writing policy and changing by-laws and zoning had been proven as critical in unlocking new housing in Los Angeles. The successful generation of media interest in prototypical projects encouraged the interest of lawmakers and led to policy reform. She spoke about the role of the architect expanding beyond the production of buildings to include advocacy and provocation.*

Damian, how do you see the role of design research in changing policy and also broadening public perceptions?

> "… if you can demonstrate that the work is scalable, it then flips to being top down."

DM I was fortunate to spend a few weeks at the end of 2024 working with Dana and the City Lab team. They have a remarkable capacity to work directly with policymakers and demonstrate the best of what architectural research can be: they're able to do the deep dive into metrics on housing supply and demographics.

They can move into the large-scale urban and suburban propositions with figureground diagrams using GIS [geographic information system] mapping, to spatialise the information. They can do the grassroots work of going out and talking with people and understanding their concerns, and then do the prototyping. It is taking a "no fear" approach to say that we must work across all levels to establish an evidence base to share with policymakers that can stimulate change.

Making change is often about finding out who outside of architectural planning has KPIs, and who you can help achieve their policy objectives. People like community development managers in local councils can be great advocates for new forms of housing; if they're on board with the idea at a community level, then they're able to sit with other people with different areas of expertise and talk about how they can make it happen.

I think broadening who we speak to outside of who we think would traditionally be in control of housing can be very helpful – not just to advance our ideas, but to gain incredibly valuable feedback [from a different perspective], because they're not planners or architects.

> "It is taking a 'no fear' approach to say that we must work across all levels to establish an evidence base to share with policymakers that can stimulate change."

SB *A lot of what you're talking to suggests a need for other skill sets beyond architecture.*

What is the potential of cross-disciplinary research to help navigate the complexity of the housing crisis and housing policy? Have you been able to draw on others with complementary skills to help with your advocacy efforts?

DM Absolutely. And importantly, they become the advocates for your work. It's one thing for us to put forward an architectural or planning solution, but it's very different to hear someone else putting forward those ideas to decision-makers. I think that advocacy from outside voices is vital – which means you need to communicate your research in a way that speaks to different people.

SB *Diana, how do you see the role of architects in affecting housing policy beyond our core skills of designing places and buildings, and how can we be more effective in presenting our design intelligence and insights for a broader audience?*

> "I've heard architects described as the brokers between those different groups, which is enabled through our spatial analysis skills."

DS Within the NSW government architect's office there's a group of excellent architects; none of them are practising architecture in a traditional fashion, but every one of them is leveraging those skills. Spatial analysis is used across multiple scales to help stakeholders like our minister's office or planning colleagues to work through potential impacts of policy and show people how to understand the real-world consequences of their decisions.

To be really effective, we must be collaborative and inclusive in our language and our practice. Effective communication happens through discussion and exchange, not just in informing people of the answer. I think that architects have the capacity to listen and distil different agendas from diverse audiences. I've heard architects described as the brokers between those different groups, which is enabled through our spatial analysis skills.

DM Architects have an ability to take information from different people and work together to create a coherent solution. It's unfruitful to talk about NIMBYs and YIMBYs because it puts these things in opposition when really, it's much more nuanced. Something I've had to learn is to be patient with every voice in the discussion. If I'm not aligned with what they're saying, I try to establish common ground.

DS It took me a lot of time and community meetings to learn to appreciate lived experience as an essential frame of reference.

SB *Are you feeling optimistic about the impact that architects are having in this moment of real crisis in housing?*

DM You must act with hope and positivity, and you must act with conviction. As a profession, as a discipline, we are doing good, and we are making a difference. I look at the fact that we have government architect roles now, something we can't take for granted. So, yes, I'm feeling positive.

DS Absolutely – I'm optimistic. It's taken a long time to see work we've been doing reflected in policy changes. Every time I see our government architect in discussion with our minister's office, or in discussion with industry, and in the work we're all doing with the pattern book, I see that as architects having agency.

— Sarah Buckeridge is co-managing principal of Hayball and a practice leader in social and affordable housing projects. Sarah is also a Victorian chapter councillor and chair of the Victorian housing committee and was made a Life Fellow of the Institute of Architects in 2024.

— Diana Snape is a principal design advisor with Government Architect NSW (GANSW), and has been leading the development and delivery of strategic programs and projects for GANSW since 2016, including the establishment of the NSW State Design Review program and the Connecting with Country Framework.

— Damian Madigan is an associate professor of architecture at the University of South Australia, a member of the South Australian government's Design Review Panel, and a registered architect. He works collaboratively with academics, industry and government to create new housing typologies across infill, density, diversity and aging-in-place.

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(WRITER) Rory Hyde

Expressions of interest

Are competitions and demonstration projects enough to shift the status quo of housing design? Rory Hyde reflects on the role and realities of conceptual ideas for new ways of living.

In one of my favourite quotes from Robin Boyd, he asks, "Is it just that the Australian public clings to its depressing little boxes because it knows no better, has seen no better design?" The assumption being, if only we were aware of other alternatives to the suburban single-family house, we would demand better, and the market would provide it. This is the thinking that underpins the ideas competition and demonstration project approach, where governments make a call for new ideas, and attempt to use these ideas to encourage the development industry to build anything apart from more depressing little boxes.

The past decade has seen various states and territories produce versions of this approach: Density and Diversity Done Well (2017) in Queensland, Demonstration Housing Project (2019) in the ACT, Future Homes (2021) in Victoria, and Missing Middle (2017) and Pattern Book (2024) in New South Wales. All of these programs were run by state government architect offices, and all seek roughly the same goal of creating new typologies of housing that are denser, more sustainable, more affordable, and more connected to community and infrastructure.

These schemes typically follow a common structure. They start with a competition, where architects are invited to submit design ideas in response to a particular set of challenges, sites or typologies. Out of these submissions, a handful of designs are awarded as winners, with much associated fanfare and press interest. Then, in some instances, the government may work in partnership with a housing provider or developer to build a demonstration project – a real prototype – to generate more press and show that it really is possible to build something new. In some cases, the government will make some edits to planning policy, offer a streamlined approval process, or set aside some budget, to help overcome the barriers that may prevent these projects from being built. Then finally, the hope is that having demonstrated that another kind of building is possible, the private sector will leap into action and a rush of developments will follow, changing the industry.

The idea is not new. One of the most iconic demonstration projects is the Weissenhofsiedlung (Weissenhof Estate), built on a site overlooking the German city of Stuttgart in 1927. Initiated by the Deutscher Werkbund, a cooperative institute of artists, capitalists and craftspeople, the project comprised a neighbourhood of 60 "workers'" houses, to demonstrate new ways of living and new prefabricated construction techniques. Led by Mies van der Rohe, the design team included 16 of the most experimental architects of the time, including Le Corbusier, Hans Scharoun and Walter Gropius. While the homes were too expensive in construction and furnishing to be within reach of the intended clientele, they were visited by some 500,000 people in three months of the exhibition and published widely, coming to stand as a manifesto for the Modern movement and ultimately disseminating modernist design ideas across the globe.

It's fair to say the competitions and demonstration projects in Australia have been less impactful. Only one of Victoria's Future Homes projects has broken ground, in the regional city of Shepparton, initiated by affordable housing provider Beyond Housing. And while the main incentive for developers to adopt these standardised plans is streamlined approvals, another scheme proposed for a site in the Melbourne suburb of Rosanna was denied planning permission by Banyule Council due to the objections of local residents. As the scheme's developer, Jim Clark-Sullivan, told *The Age*, "The whole point of this program is that it's supposed to circumvent this sort of NIMBYism, to enable medium-density development on good sites."

The ACT's Demonstration Housing Project has produced Stellulata Cohousing, a resident-led co-housing scheme of four attached dwellings in Ainslie, Canberra. The project is at once modest and pioneering; simple, considered architecture, with an emphasis on aging in place, shared facilities and energy performance, all documented with openness on the project's blog. However, it appears to be the only built outcome of the government's scheme.

(ABOVE LEFT) Future Homes Shepparton, by Agency for Design Strategy in collaboration with Includesign for housing provider Beyond Housing, has overcome NIMBYism and broken ground. Image courtesy of Agency for Design Strategy and Includesign.

(ABOVE RIGHT) Stellulata Cohousing, a resident-led scheme of four attached dwellings in Canberra, is currently one of the few built outcomes of the ACT's Demonstration Housing Project. Photographer: Matilda Embry.

In other instances, the winners of ideas competitions are celebrated with press releases and videos, while it's unclear or too soon to tell whether anything will be built. After all this effort and energy, why have there been so few built outcomes? Why don't these schemes have more impact, or lead to lasting change?

It could be that these schemes set out to answer the wrong question. There's no lack of awareness of new ideas or alternative typologies, it's that the momentum behind business-as-usual is so hard to challenge. In the 55 years since Boyd complained about "depressing little boxes," the mechanism of suburban development has only become more elaborate and entrenched. The suburbs are a product of mortgage lending, real estate, precinct planning, available skills and trades, transportation planning, immense political pressure applied by industry lobby groups, as well as cultural ideas of identity and aspiration, located somewhere deep inside the nation's indefinable psyche. Yale University professor and historian of the suburbs Dolores Hayden describes this combination of forces as "suburban growth machines." And, as the name suggests, the machine only wants to keep growing, to keep chewing up land, relentlessly spreading over the horizon.

To take on a system as voracious as this, a competition for new ideas isn't enough. To make these schemes more effective would require real investment in building, as well as addressing the "dark matter" that underpins business-as-usual. A few brief ideas to get started:

— Land: Governments could find public land, or acquire suitable plots, and make it available for projects that show the way forward.
— Policy: A thorough overhaul of planning policies and processes to place desired outcomes of climate and affordability at the centre.
— Advice: Provide support for small developers and cooperatives with advice on how to navigate the hoops of bureaucracy.
— Backing: Provide low-interest and guaranteed loans for developments that address targets of affordability, sustainability, climate resilience and inclusivity.
— Research: Support research into new typologies that reflect the different ways we live today.
— Demonstration: Governments could use major projects, such as the 2032 Olympic Games in Brisbane, to build demonstrations on a grand scale.
— Regulation: Regulate bad development out of existence. This is a tough political fight, but one worth having. A stick to go alongside the above carrots.

The ideas competition and demonstration project approach is founded on the belief that "if only they knew better!" But changing big complex systems is harder than that. Developers are going to develop. Planners are going to plan. And the growth machine is going to grow. In order to change a system as socially, economically and politically entangled as this, we need more than new designs, we need structural transformation.

— Rory Hyde is an associate professor in architecture, curatorial design and practice at the University of Melbourne. His work is focused on design for the public good and redefining the role of the architect today. His books *Future Practice* and *Architects After Architecture* were both awarded the Australian Institute of Architects Award for Architecture in the Media.

(WRITER) Linda Cheng

Efficiency vs. supply

Oversized and underused existing homes present an opportunity to consider the solution of "increased supply" in a more efficient and sustainable way.

Supply, supply and more supply. In Australia's worsening housing affordability crisis, experts of all stripes seem to have one answer: to simply build more. According to the federal government's National Housing Accord, Australia needs to build 240,000 new homes annually, equating to 1.2 million by 2029.

But in all the consternation about housing supply, there has been little to no discussion about the efficiency (or lack thereof) of our existing housing stock. According to the 2021 Australian Census, there were 10.8 million private dwellings in Australia, around 70 percent of which were detached homes, and up to 10 percent of which were unoccupied (either permanently or temporarily) on Census night. Estimates vary on the number of genuinely empty or underused homes in the country, from 136,000 across Australia, to up to 100,000 in Victoria alone.[1]

Regardless of the exact figures, these empty homes present an opportunity to boost housing supply. Around the world, governments are using taxation as a way to discourage land banking and encourage vacant homes to be made available on the open market. In Canada's British Columbia, the Speculation and vacancy tax netted the province CA$231 million in revenue between 2018 and 2020, and more importantly, returned an estimated 20,000 housing units to the market. Closer to home, results have been mixed: a similar scheme in Victoria – the Vacant residential land tax – only collected $11.3 million from 1,031 properties in 2023, and could be missing up to 23,000 properties in its catchment area due to enforcement difficulties.[2]

Then there is the size of Australia's largely detached homes – 236 square metres on average (with the average new house in Australia being even larger, at 250 square metres), resulting in swathes of unoccupied bedrooms across the suburbs. According to analysis of the 2021 Census data conducted by the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI), 76.8 percent of households (or 7.47 million homes) have more bedrooms than they need for typical sleeping arrangements, and 44.3 percent (or 4.31 million) have two or more spare bedrooms.[3]

Some experts are calling for better utilisation of existing housing, such as encouraging households to rent out their spare bedrooms to alleviate the short-term rental crisis. But this approach doesn't need to be for just short-term relief. In 2023, for example, the UK government announced plans to allow single houses to be split into two units without planning permission, making it easier to increase the density and occupancy of existing homes. If we apply the same idea to Australian housing, the average 236-square-metre house becomes a resource for increasing supply. Not only do large homes often come with more bedrooms than are needed, they also have multiple living areas, dining areas, bathrooms and car spaces. In other words, there is already enough space and amenity for multiple households within the envelope of the average existing house.

In line with the New South Wales government's Apartment Design Guide, a 236-square-metre dwelling could accommodate a one-, two- or three-bedroom flat, with room to spare (only 50 square metres are needed for one bedroom, 70 square metres for two, and 90 square metres for three). Even if we only doubled the occupation of a single detached home, this would still significantly increase the total number of dwellings, adding to the housing supply without building more new homes, chewing up more arable land or putting undue strain on existing infrastructure and resources.

The number of houses with three or more empty bedrooms matches the Australian government's target of building 1.2 million new homes by 2029 – further highlighting the potential to ease the housing shortage through better utilisation of the country's most inefficient homes. Retrofitting just 28 percent of multi-bedroom homes could achieve this target. In Western Australia, the Gen Y Demonstration Housing Project designed by David Barr Architects (now Cast Studio) proves that three dwellings can fit on a single residential lot that also blends harmoniously within the existing neighbourhood. There's no reason why the same ideas can't apply to the transformation of an existing dwelling. Similarly, in Brisbane, Live Work Share House (2020) by Bligh Graham Architects accommodates two residences and an office on a typical suburban block. International projects also hint at a way forward. In Santiago, Chile, the project Three apartments (2023) by Oficina Bravo converts a house into a collective housing complex of three independent units – dividing the existing structure in half, with a main unit facing north and two smaller apartments facing south.

Governments around Australia have been keen to promote the merits of medium-density housing in the suburbs (the "missing middle"), often enlisting the help of architects through competitions, planning amendments and demonstration projects to generate and sell ideas – such as the NSW government's 2017 Missing Middle Design Competition, the first of its kind in Australia. However, planning bodies often face intense opposition from local communities who are resistant to density, overshadowing, traffic and overpopulation in their streets, and planning changes needed to facilitate such

(TOP) Live Work Share House (2020) by Bligh Graham Architects accommodates two residences an an office on a typical suburban block. Photographer: Christopher Frederick Jones.

(BOTTOM) Gen Y Demonstration Housing Project by David Barr Architects (now Cast Studio) proves that three dwellings can fit on a site previously occupied by one. Photographer: Robert Frith/Acorn Photo.

developments often stall at the local level for years.

Retrofitting an existing house into two or more occupancies could neutralise this resistance, as it can enhance density without drastically changing the building envelope (maintaining neighbourhood character) or requiring more land (curbing urban sprawl). Through his Bluefield Housing research, South Australian architect and researcher Damian Madigan has advocated for “co-located housing,” a concept that facilitates the addition of multiple dwellings on an existing lot. Madigan argues that terminology such as “ancillary” or “secondary” dwellings should be done away with, and that all dwellings on a lot should be considered “primary.” An existing home, he explains, “can be divided into multiple dwellings and/or added to, to create an additional home” on the property. These homes must also “be designed to share a high-amenity garden space that is large enough to accommodate a deep-root soil zone and medium and large trees.” Madigan’s proposal for a co-located housing planning scheme amendment was adopted into the South Australian Planning and Design Code in April 2025.

This type of retrofit-led densification could also work to support older Australians, who, according to AHURI research, are more likely to have excess unused bedrooms and are often reluctant to downsize. Multigenerational and collective family set-ups have been highlighted as early models for suburban densification. Hallmarks such as granny flats and Fonzie flats (secondary dwellings above a garage) have already been embraced by architects. The retrofit of existing housing for multigenerational or multi-family living – converting a family home into two or more units for an older household and their adult children, or for two or more independent households – would increase density while taking advantage of underused stock.

The housing crisis is complex and multifaceted, requiring solutions on all fronts. But if we agree that the answer to Australia’s housing woes is more supply, than we can’t ignore the potential in the 70 percent of our existing housing stock. More supply under the status quo would only lead to more chronically under-occupied homes, more carbon emissions and more unaffordability in the face of material and labour shortages. In discussions about increasing supply, we can’t forget the cost to the environment and the growing need to retrofit wherever possible. Architecture has the design solutions, it only needs to be facilitated by planning schemes and political will.

— Linda Cheng is a former editor of ArchitectureAu. She completed a Bachelor of Planning and Design (Architecture) at the University of Melbourne and has worked at a small architecture practice in Melbourne.

(FOOTNOTES)

(1) “Administrative data snapshot of housing,” Australian Bureau of Statistics, 30 June 2021, abs.gov.au/statistics/people/housing/administrative-data-snapshot-population-and-housing-experimental-housing-data/30-june-2021; “Empty Homes,” Prosper Australia, 2024, prosper.org.au/campaigns/empty-homes

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(WRITER) Kelly Greenop

Fit for purpose: Culturally adequate housing

Public architecture in Australia is increasingly celebrating cultural diversity, but residential design is lagging behind. How do we ensure that, in the rush to increase housing supply, we don’t create stock that isn’t adaptable to the needs of our culturally diverse and developing population?

Australia’s housing crisis has become one of the most repeated headlines in recent years. The issue is global, affecting nearly every Western country regardless of GDP, politics or housing policy. Proposed solutions range from tax reform to subsidies and, crucially for architects, increasing supply. This means building more, and fast. But what should this new housing in Australia be? While “fast, decent, functional” sounds right, the real needs are more complex than they seem.

So let’s take a step back and ask: how do we ensure that, in the rush to build, we don’t create housing stock that won’t last the distance for a diversifying and developing Australian population? To answer this, we need to understand what makes “good housing,” and, in particular, where our blind spots are. We need to ensure that we get this important moment right so that what we build now will endure into the future, and maximise its ongoing value.

What makes a house adequate?

Housing is a right, not a privilege, as the United Nations made clear in its 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

“Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of [themselves] and of [their] family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond [their] control.”[1]

Nations have a responsibility to provide housing. Despite the harsh reality of homelessness today, full and fair housing remains a goal we must genuinely strive to achieve.

Defining what housing provision truly means took the UN far longer than the 1948 declaration, only clarifying it in 2010 with its definition of “Housing Adequacy.” It stressed that housing must be “more than four walls and a roof,” and instead “the right to live somewhere in security, peace and dignity.”[2] This definition includes seven specific criteria, all of which must be met for housing to be considered genuinely adequate:

1. Provide security of tenure;
2. Provide essential services, materials, facilities and infrastructure (such as water and electricity);
3. Be affordable, meaning housing costs do not threaten the enjoyment of other rights;
4. Be habitable, providing adequate space, structural stability and protection from the elements;
5. Be accessible, preventing the marginalisation or exclusion of people from housing;
6. Be located in proximity to services such as health, employment and educational facilities; and,
7. Be culturally adequate, enabling the expression of cultural identity.

I believe it is this final criteria – cultural adequacy – that is our enduring blind spot and poses a risk to the adequacy of what we build in the rush to respond to the housing crisis.

Australia’s claim to be “the most successful multicultural society” comes with the need to properly recognise and value – not just tolerate – cultural diversity, a crucial consideration in meeting the obligation of culturally adequate housing. This includes appreciating differing factors like family size and structure, and norms around gathering, sleeping, cooking, eating and privacy. The ongoing presence of vernacular housing types around the world, reflecting local values and preferred ways of living, shows that culture remains a vital component of how we design and understand housing.

Our record of housing inadequacy

The history of housing provided for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people since colonisation gives us a graphic example of what poor housing design for cultural fit can mean for the people living in it. In addition to houses for First Nations people being, from the outset, too few in number, many research projects have demonstrated that the assumption that “any house is a good house” is plainly wrong.

In a 2022–23 research project with First Nations colleague Carroll Go-Sam, Dr Kali Marnane and others, we used UN housing adequacy criteria to assess suitability for local families in Gununa, Mornington Island. Like many remote Aboriginal communities, Gununa lacks freehold land, making mortgages and private home-building impossible. Residents rely on government housing. Through surveys and interviews, we found cultural adequacy was the most significant issue, highlighting a major gap between housing provision and the cultural needs of the community.

As we noted in the report, “the sharing of houses with family is so normal for the culture of Gununa residents that this should be the expected use of housing.”[3] Yet housing design still assumes a nuclear family model, with a main bedroom and a couple of smaller ones. In reality, houses are often shared by multiple families, extended kin, or regular visitors, and this mismatch places strain on both people and housing.

A second cultural need often overlooked in Gununa housing – and likely in many Indigenous communities – is connection to Country. Residents live in Gununa because of deep ties to its people, places, birds, animals, plants, weather and seas. Some are traditional owners; others, displaced generations ago, have formed strong bonds. Yet houses often ignore this connection, turning their backs on sea views, missing breezes or opportunities to observe the weather. Residents noticed this lack and missed potential. Living in a remote home community often means sacrificing education, jobs, healthcare and housing choice. Given these sacrifices, designing homes that connect to Country is a fundamental and achievable way to support residents’ wellbeing and culture through the built environment.

New communities, new challenges

Considering more recent cultural arrivals, Dr Maram Shaweesh explores Lebanese Australian housing in her book *Making Home in the Suburb*, which offers rare insights into how Muslim and Christian families – and particularly women within them – adapt and experience suburban homes in Sydney and Brisbane.

Shaweesh’s research shows how Lebanese cultural values persist across generations, shaping housing preferences that differ both from those back home and from Anglo-Australian norms. She highlights architectural implications such as privacy needs within and outside the home. Open-plan layouts, often seen as universally suitable, can be culturally inappropriate and stressful for residents whose values and needs – for example, for privacy – often conflict with such designs.

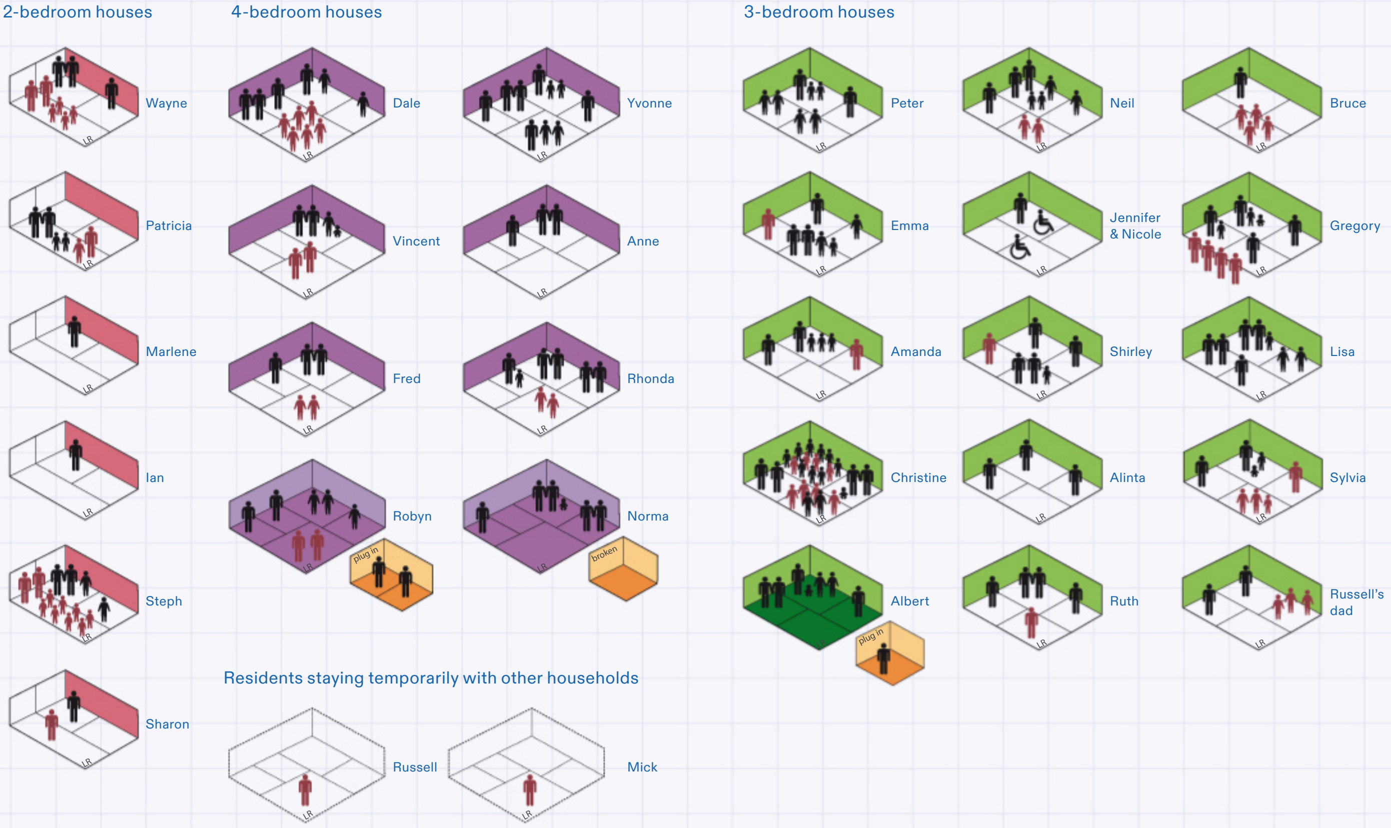


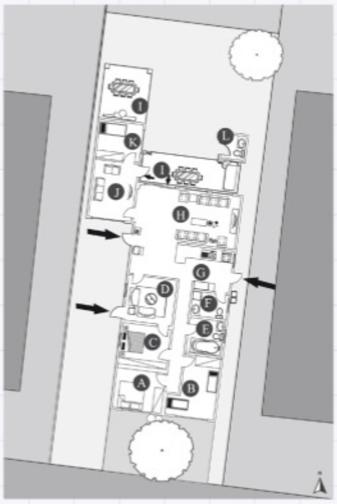
Figure 1: Diagrams explaining the bedroom occupancy of surveyed houses in Gununa, Mornington Island, in 2022. Each room is a bedroom, and “LR” represents a living room where people sleep. A “plug in” is a freestanding additional set of bedrooms to help relieve crowding pressure on the house. Diagrams: Kali Marnane.

Particularly pertinent is the concept of “Bayt Al-Ayleh” – “the family’s home” – which “refers to the ongoing relationship between children and their parents’ house after moving out.”[4] It means houses should always be ready for visits or extended stays from grown children and their families. This often includes multigenerational living for cultural and financial reasons. This creates challenges in homes designed for Anglo-Australian norms. Couples living with parents or in-laws often struggle with privacy and autonomy, so must undertake their own adaptations in order to make their homes culturally adequate.

In one example, the adaptations to a multigenerational home reflect complex spatial needs of a Lebanese Australian intergenerational family, with multiple entries supporting privacy and autonomy. A separate but connected granny flat at the rear further accommodates extended family in this culturally nuanced setting. But adapting homes, already costly, is becoming harder amid the escalating housing crisis.

In recent years, Australian public architecture has increasingly celebrated cultural diversity, with greater recognition of First Nations cultures and fine designs for varied religious and other communities. Architects from these groups are also gaining prominence. However, while the social value of housing has gained recognition, housing design where the end user isn’t the client still lags behind, particularly when it comes to cultural diversity and long-term suitability. The studies above are just two of many, yet there is still much to learn about how current housing supports – or hinders – lives within our diverse Australian society. To avoid costly, carbon-heavy reworks, we must design housing that not only endures, but also understands and supports our culturally diverse communities into the future.

— Dr Kelly Greenop is an associate professor at the University of Queensland’s School of Architecture, Design and Planning. Her research is in First Nations place and architecture and digital cultural heritage.



(DIAGRAM)

A	Bedroom
B	Bedroom
C	Bedroom
D	Living
E	Bathroom
F	Laundry/toilet
G	Kitchen
H	Main living area
I	Outdoor social spaces
J	Living
K	Bedroom (accessed through J)
L	External toilet

Figure 2: This layout shows how one Lebanese Australian multigenerational family adapted and used space to accommodate their culturally based privacy needs. Diagram: Maram Shaweesh. Not to scale.

(FOOTNOTES)

(1) “Universal Declaration of Human Rights: Article 25,” United Nations General Assembly, 10 December 1948.

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(DISCUSSION)

(WRITER) Alexis Kalagas

Lessons from London

Allied to progressive approaches to procurement, partnership and engagement, London is building a new wave of projects that hold developers to higher accountability. This context offers insight into how, in Australia, we might catalyse new directions in social housing, public health and economic imperatives.

Investment in social and affordable housing in Australia has a boom-bust cadence. Deployed as economic stimulus, governments have reacted to turbulence, whether financial (2008) or epidemiological (2020), while the housing crisis has continued to fester. Have we reached an inflection point?

From where I write in Melbourne, the period since the onset of the pandemic has seen a ratcheting up of action – the Victorian government's Big Housing Build (including the 25-year highrise redevelopment program) and, nationally, the federal Housing Australia Future Fund. This scale of investment is transformative, and with it comes a once-in-a-generation opportunity to expand how we frame social and affordable housing. It invites a new kind of brief, one that is genuinely social in scope and ambition, and a larger role for architects in shaping the systems, policies and partner-ships that support it.

On this, there is much to learn from London. Despite the city grappling with its own affordability crisis, ambitious policies have empowered local authorities to build again, reversing decades of decline. Allied to progressive approaches to procurement, partnership and engagement, the result is a wave of innovative projects grounded in a holistic view of social value. From estate regeneration that avoids displacement, to mixed-use developments that enrich neighbourhoods, these projects reinforce the agency of designers in reimagining estate renewal – and social housing more broadly – within a wider civic agenda. Two very different developments exemplify what makes the London context distinctive: the regeneration of the Kings Crescent Estate in Stoke Newington, led by Karakusevic Carson Architects, and A House for Artists in Barking, designed by Apparata.

Completed in 1971 as a modernist ensemble of mid-rise slabs and towers, Kings Crescent Estate had fallen into a state of disrepair by the early 2000s, with a void at its centre after aborted demolition works. Working alongside Henley Halebrown and Muf Architecture Art, Karakusevic Carson Architects was appointed in 2011 by the London Borough of Hackney to lead a new mixed-tenure masterplan offering an alternative to wholesale demolition. Phases 1 and 2, completed in 2017, involved the refurbishment of 101 social rent dwellings and the careful integration of three new buildings, introducing a language of broken courtyard blocks. A semi-pedestrianised "playable street" bisects the scheme, retail opens up the key park edge, and a cultural space draws visitors into the heart of the estate.

First impressions are of a dignified, well-proportioned architecture, thoughtfully detailed. The courtyard gardens and public realm feel lived-in and cared-for. This is not a coincidence. After two decades of false starts, residents – a mix of social tenants and "right to buy" leaseholders – were understandably disillusioned. By balancing retrofit and redevelopment, the new scheme enabled significant upgrades to retained dwellings, including converting ground-level garages into family-size "patio flats" and adding upper-level winter gardens, all while minimising disruption. Working within a new steering group structure established by the council, Karakusevic Carson Architects placed direct resident engagement at the centre of the design process – from site-wide strategy to detailed design, and continuing through construction, handover and post-occupancy evaluation.

Though linked to regeneration of the former Lintons Estate, A House for Artists is better understood in the context of the wider renewal of Barking's town centre. In 2015, the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham began exploring plans for an "Artist Enterprise Zone," to attract creatives priced out of inner London. Partnering with arts organisation Create London as co-commissioner, and supported by the Greater London Authority, the council identified a leftover site for a live/work building for artists, to be developed by its arms-length regeneration company, Be First. Apparata, a young practice formed the previous year, was appointed after winning an invited competition in 2016, with a scheme that combined opportunities for collective living with use-neutral plans that could accommodate multiple domestic arrangements.

Completed in 2021, the project reads on approach as a public building, which, in part, it is. The experimental brief challenged the architects to combine housing and civic uses in new ways. In return for below-market living and studio space, residents deliver free creative programs from the ground-floor public hall (effectively, an artist-led community centre). Create London facilitated the public program for two years with philanthropic backing, before leaving the resident group to self-organise.

Flexibility is integral to Apparata's economical deck access design, inspired by an open industrial architecture. With the structure pushed to the envelope, residents can add and subtract rooms and mobile steel kitchens can be repositioned. Sockets and radiators are kept to party walls, and services run through raised timber floors. Apparata produced a handbook for DIY internal alterations to reinforce this invitation to modify.

Both projects are exemplary as design outcomes. They should also be understood, however, as products of a system that is better able to surface innovation and hold producers of social and affordable housing to the highest accountability in the interests of a wider public. It is this context that holds clues for how architects in Australia working on similar projects might position themselves to have greater influence in shaping briefs and advocating for approaches that could catalyse new portfolio directions – for example, gentler forms of retrofit and staged renewal, the strategic integration of non-residential uses, or joined-up thinking that deploys housing-focused investments as a place-based lever to address connected social, public health and economic imperatives.

Lesson 1: Centring existing residents

Since 2018, the Greater London Authority has required majority support via resident ballot as a condition for grant funding for estate renewal that involves demolition of social homes. While the specificities of British politics, a history of tenant organisation, the legacy of the '70s community architecture movement, and the post-Grenfell environment are contributing factors – noting that Australian public housing tenants do not constitute an electoral base like UK council estate residents – these measures have had a profound impact on design and process. The policy incentivises

(ABOVE) A House for Artists designed by Apparata, provides highly adaptable, below-market living and studio spaces inspired by open industrial architecture. Photographer: David Grandorge.

(BELOW) A House for Artists can read from the street like a public building, reflecting its experimental brief to combine housing and civic uses in new ways. Photographer: Johan Dehlin.

a level of co-design to earn community support. In practice, it has led to more intensive consultation, revisions of schemes to address resident concerns, and even the cancellation of projects that failed to win resident backing. Beyond advocating for an equivalent mandate, architects in Australia can lend their expertise to support resident self-organisation, including cross-site alliances, by introducing community-driven design ideas into the public conversation.

Lesson 2: Direct procurement and strategic partnerships

In London, design competitions (including among practices pre-qualified via the Greater London Authority's competitive Architecture and Urbanism Framework) are more prevalent for social and affordable housing, particularly on flagship projects. This is unlike the consortia approach preferred in most Australian states and territories, with indirect design procurement via developer- and builder-led bids and strategic decisions like use-mix and yield targets fixed to satisfy government business cases. Increased procurement through design competitions would not only empower architects to explore design innovation that positively influences project briefs, but also unlock opportunities on small sites for emerging practices. In the case of A House for Artists, the competition allowed Apparata to push the ambition of the brief. The multi-stakeholder structure – itself an innovative public–third sector partnership – also meant the architects had a design champion within the client team in Create London, which acted as the custodian of the project's programmatic vision and creative mission. As more architects take on roles within public agencies across Australia, those working in expanded practice can advocate for the targeted use of design competitions, particularly on high-impact or constrained sites.

Lesson 3: Extended engagement and co-design

Compared to Australia, where consultation is typically undertaken by government or specialist consultants, architects in London play an increasingly foundational role as intermediaries between public clients and communities, translating local aspirations into design proposals. This reorients the dynamic away from risk mitigation and opens up space for collaborative co-design. Crucially, practices like Karakusevic Carson Architects have developed the capacity for extended engagement, including within a formal client remit, benefiting from post-occupancy feedback loops in phased regeneration contexts. It's experience in navigating the national funding landscape has also enabled it to play an advocacy role, working with resident groups to secure resourcing for community-led social infrastructure. A shift toward this approach in Australia will require interested practices to strengthen their engagement capability, and to make a compelling case to government clients for integrated service models.

Australia is moving in the London direction. The abruptness of the decision to demolish 44 public housing towers in Melbourne has galvanised the local design community to play a more active role in public debate. At the same time, sustained investment in the community housing sector has built delivery capacity and increased the appetite for new forms of partnership and design. Projects like St Albans Housing by NMBW Architecture Studio and MADA demonstrate the value when these dynamics align. The challenge now is to move beyond a narrow focus on housing output, toward a more expansive brief – one that embraces social and affordable housing as a civic project, and enables architects to play a generative role in shaping the conditions through which social value is imagined, delivered and sustained.

— Alexis Kalagas works across urban strategy, research, design and development. He has a specific interest in housing, neighbourhoods and urban futures.

(TOP) The Kings Crescent Estate by scheme by Karakusevic Carson Architects, balanced retrofit and redevelopment, enabling significant upgrades to retained dwellings while minimising disruption. Photographer: Peter Landers.

(BOTTOM) Retail spaces open up Kings Crescent Estate's key park edge, while a cultural space draws visitors into the heart of the estate. Photographer: Peter Landers.

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Australian Institute of Architects

Design Institute of Australia

Bangs Street, Prahran

(COUNTRY)	Wurundjeri
(LOCATION)	Naarm/Melbourne, Vic
(REVIEWER)	Andy Fergus
(PHOTOGRAPHER)	Tom Blachford

(ARCHITECT)

Jackson Clements Burrows Architects

●

TYPE OF SUPPLY	Social housing and private built-to-rent
SITE AREA	12,530 m²
DWELLINGS IN PROJECT	434
DWELLINGS PREVIOUSLY ON SITE	120
DENSITY (DWELLINGS PER HECTARE)	346
HIGH PHYSICAL SUPPORT DWELLINGS	11
DISABILITY DISCRIMINATION ACT STANDARD DWELLINGS	12
CAR AND BIKE SPACES	272 car 305 bike
HEIGHT (STOREYS)	3–12
CLOSEST PUBLIC TRANSPORT	160 m

15
Bangs
Street

A new public-private partnership strategy delivers a high-quality, mixed-tenure estate which, through its suite of communal and commercial facilities, goes beyond increasing housing supply and sets out to host and foster social connectivity.

As of March 2025, the waitlist for public housing in Victoria has grown to over 55,000 families. Just 2.8 percent of the state's total housing was social housing, ranking the lowest in Australia and trailing the national average of 4.1 percent.[1] There is little debate about the scale of solution required, but the respective roles for public and private actors are subject to ongoing debate.

The Bangs Street public housing renewal demonstrates one potential path forward. The project is part of the first phase of Housing Victoria's Ground Lease Model (GLM), a public-private partnership strategy that aims to deliver mixed-tenure estate regeneration while maintaining long-term public ownership of land. Working closely with a development consortium selected through a competitive process, Jackson Clements Burrows Architects (JCB) has delivered a dense urban precinct of 434 new dwellings (comprising 228 social and 206 market rental) to replace 120 public housing units in the inner-Melbourne suburb of Prahran.

However, this is a project which provides much more for its community than just homes. A new network of lanes and arcades stitches the island site into the surrounding context, delivers new high-quality open space for the broader neighbourhood, and incorporates a range of community and active uses to generate public life. Combined with the custodianship of the community housing provider Community Housing Limited (CHL), the project offers a number of critical lessons for the next generation of estate regeneration.

In a political environment where the market is still seen as king, and where the provision of social housing has experienced a long trajectory of decline – from the formidable Victorian Housing Commission of the post-war years to the narrowing of scope, funding and responsibility from the 1970s onwards – Homes Victoria's GLM shouldn't be evaluated in isolation as a step down from the gold standard of publicly led estate regeneration, but as a significant step up from the sale of estates to private developers. It signals a positive shift away from more challenging private delivery approaches, like that of the "Kensington model," which sought to sell off estates to developers who would deliver private homes to cross-subsidise a marginal increase in social homes. It was later heavily criticised for a lack of positive socioeconomic mobility for residents, and poor social integration between owner-occupiers and social renters.[2]

The GLM, in contrast, employs a 40-year lease which enables a public-private partnership that draws upon the lessons from an established model of funding public infrastructure. Purpose-built, non-profit consortiums, comprising development, community housing and design partners, compete for the exclusive rights to develop multiple properties as a single investment, achieving an economy of scale. At the end of the lease the buildings revert back to public ownership.

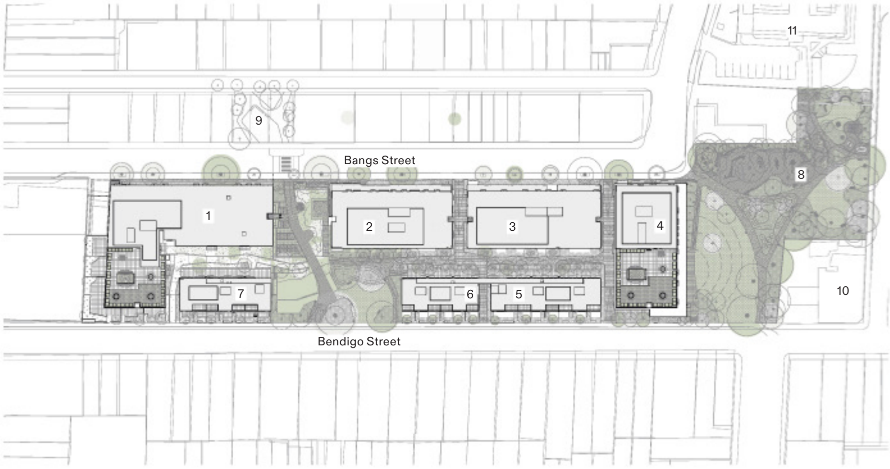
Bangs Street is one of three estates to be developed under the first GLM program. Bangs Street is on a long, thin, rectangular site, sandwiched between an incrementally transforming industrial area to the west (across Bangs Street) and a nineteenth-century residential area to the east (across Bendigo Street). The typology, fencing and landscaping of the estate's previous housing, built in the early '70s, divided the neighbourhood, restricted public movement through the site and created unsafe spaces. These dwellings were demolished in 2020, after lying vacant for a decade following an earlier failed redevelopment proposal. When the design team commenced the new Bangs Street project, only a collection of significant trees remained.

A porous estate

JCB's design strategy from the earliest phase of the bid involved a commitment to "no dead ends" within the precinct, ensuring the completed precinct would feel open, porous and connected into the surrounding network of streets and open spaces. A central, resident-focused pedestrian lane forms a new north–south community spine for the project, providing a heavily-planted space protected from cars, with access to front doors and sight lines through the precinct. Blind corners and unsafe dead ends are eliminated entirely. This spine is complemented by a series of direct and offset east–west lanes through the block, inviting the public in and stitching seamlessly into the City of Stonnington's Mount Street landscape masterplan (Tract Consultants). This ensures a connective urban environment which, in time, will connect through lanes and pocket parks from Bendigo Street through to the Chapel Street retail strip and beyond.

The lane network is anchored by two new green open spaces totalling almost 5,000 square metres, with a central courtyard forming the heart of the development for community gatherings,

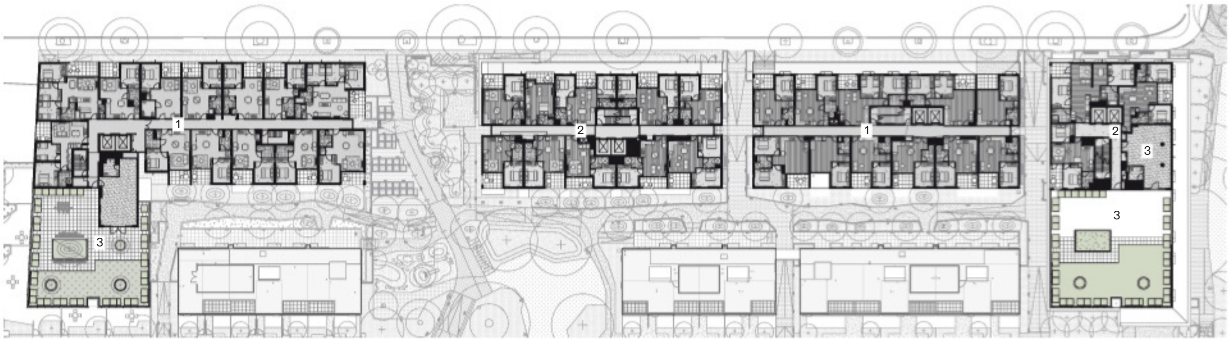
(PREVIOUS)	Bangs Street is a dense urban precinct of 434 new social and market rental dwellings in inner-Melbourne.
(OPPOSITE TOP)	Two new green open spaces anchor the ground plane's movement network, retain existing trees and form the heart of the precinct's community gatherings.
(OPPOSITE BOTTOM)	A heavily planted central pedestrian laneway provides cooling and eliminates blind corners and unsafe dead ends by allowing passive surveillance and access to front doors.
(RIGHT)	The project is part of the first phase of Housing Victoria's Ground Lease Model (GLM), which aims to deliver mixed-tenure estate regeneration while maintaining long-term public ownership of land.


11
9
Bangs Street
8
1
2
3
4
7
6
5
10
Bendigo Street
0
10
25
50 m

Site plan
1:2500

(SITE PLAN)

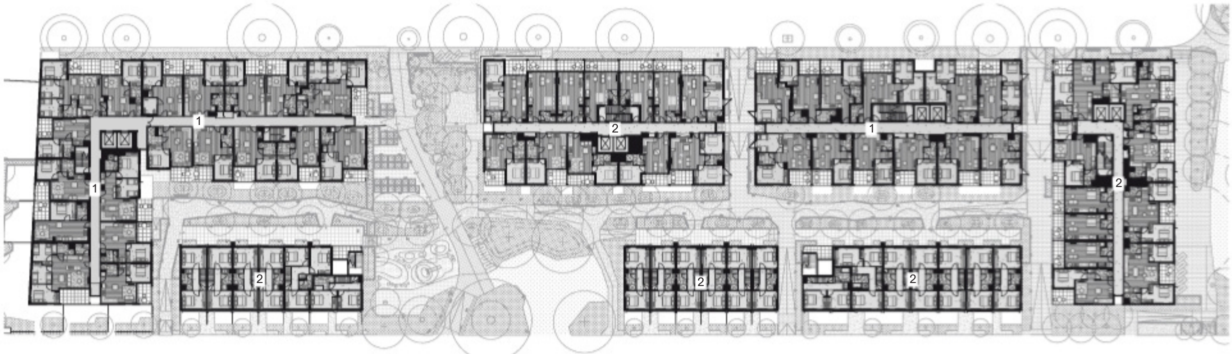
1 Building A
2 Building B
3 Buidling C
4 Building D
5 Building E1
6 Building E2
7 Building F
8 Bendigo Street Playground
9 Bangs Street Park
10 Flying Duck Hotel
11 King Street Social Housing Towers



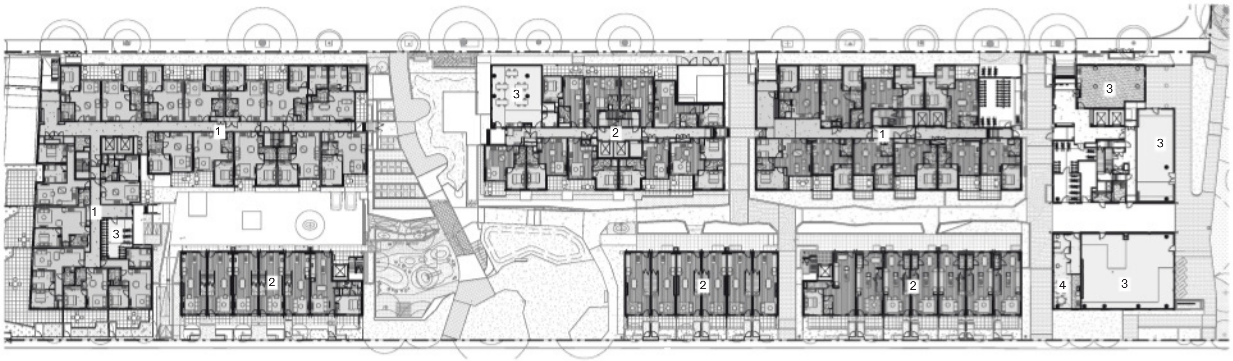
Level six floor plan
1:1250

(FLOOR PLANS)

1 Social apartments
2 Private apartments (built-to-rent)
3 Communal areas
4 Office



Level one floor plan
1:1250


3
2
1
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3
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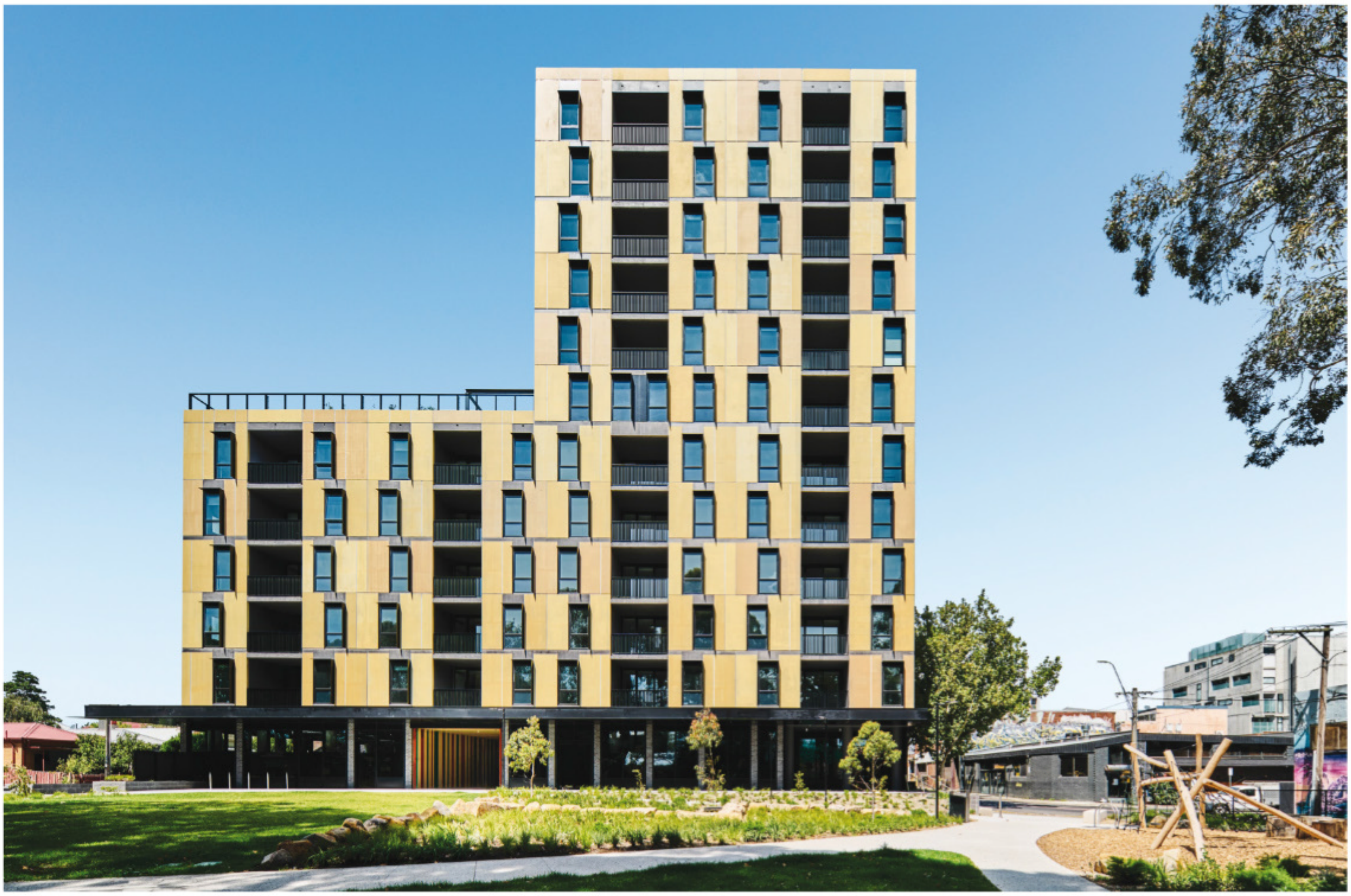
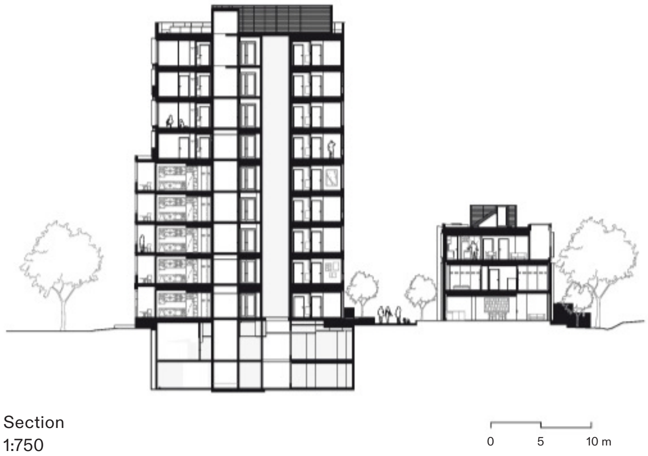
3
0
5
20 m

Ground floor plan
1:1250

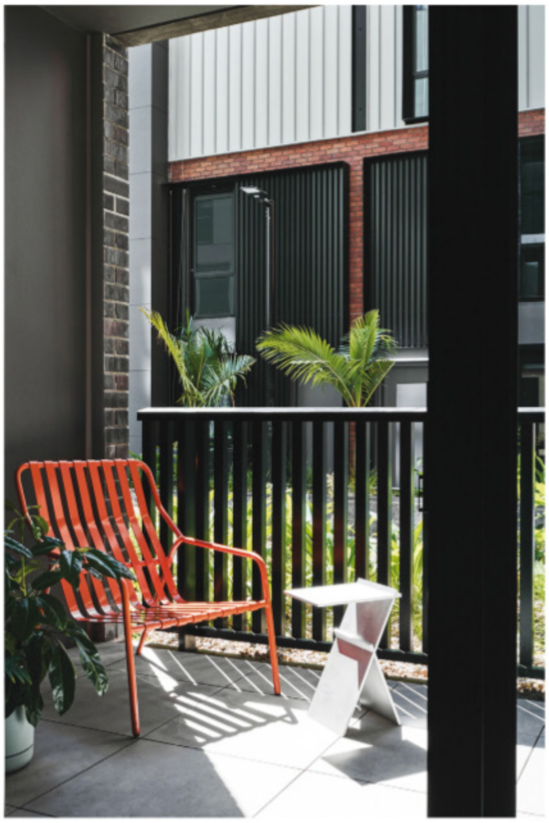


(ABOVE) A palette of stained finishes that reference the surrounding residential context are applied to the facades, bringing a patina that softens the precast concrete buildings.

(RIGHT) Rooftop gardens are provided in consolidated locations and add to the building's amenity offerings beyond the ground-plane spaces.



Section
1:750



and a more passive lawn space to the north. These spaces maximised the instant impact of existing trees, while a clever basement design wraps the western edge of the courtyard, protecting existing trees and establishing generous new soil areas.

Massing, diversity and tenure blindness

Despite this porosity, Bangs Street is still a strikingly dense development in comparison with its surrounds, though the variation in building heights greatly improves the feeling of spatial generosity. The primary massing of slab buildings along Bangs Street rises from six to nine levels in the south, with a 12-level point tower to the north, and a low bar of dual-aspect, three-to-four-storey apartments and maisonettes facing Bendigo Street. The scale crescendo of the tower feels comfortable in its open-park setting and provides much-needed skyline diversity. While the street interface feels a little cliff-like on the narrow Bangs Street, a two-metre landscape setback combined with mature street trees helps soften this significantly, and the lower scale to Bendigo Street brings light into the central spine.

The design team explored a range of alternative schemes to meet the development's brief for separation between social and private tenure buildings before settling on an alternating "A-B-A-B" distribution strategy. This ensures that social homes cannot be visibly distinguished from market housing. The framing of the central courtyard with both social and market homes is another key success that has successfully brought the two tenant communities together.

Architectural diversity is achieved across tenure using a palette of stained concrete finishes and brick tiles that bring a patina that softens the dominantly precast concrete buildings. In a heavily cost-constrained context, JCB carefully drew from tones of the surrounding residential environment to humanise the concrete forms and add variation over the highly visible facades. Simple, repeating metal elements provide depth, while offset windows, projecting shades, and planter and window boxes provide moments of delight. The commitment to concentrating design effort in areas most experienced by pedestrians is commendable.

JCB director Tim Jackson points to the critical role of design review by the Office of the Victorian Government Architect (OVGA), which guided and empowered the design team throughout the process. The ambitions of the team to open up the site with lanes and achieve design diversity were further encouraged by the direction of the OVGA, offering opportunity to redistribute yield within the envelope. This layer of design scrutiny embedded within the GLM process was critical both in the assessment of the consortium bids and in advocating for a high standard of design through to completion.

Integrated management

In contrast with earlier Homes Victoria projects that provide only housing, Bangs Street incorporates an artist residence and studio, a commercial tenancy, a toy library, a community kitchen in partnership with Cultivate Community, and a mobility hub with shared e-bikes provided by Kola Bikes. These spaces are positioned onto key open spaces and laneways to maximise the connection between the resident community and broader public.

Rooftop gardens are provided in the northernmost (private) and southernmost (public) buildings and co-located with indoor communal rooms, which CHL community development manager Kate Daddo notes are a critical success for children's play, fostering community formation. During my visit, residents also openly shared their love of the rooftop gardens, the role of the shared spaces and the relationships they have formed within and across buildings in only a short period of time.

The role of CHL has been integral here, and shows the transformational potential of an engaged custodian and community curator when compared to older approaches like the Kensington model. With an on-site presence and an active role in bringing together local services and businesses, CHL has empowered the use of shared spaces at Bangs Street and explicitly encouraged an active, engaged community through events organised in the well-designed third spaces. Early results are promising, with significant cross-tenure and wider-community participation.

Victoria has a long way to go if we are to address our significant social housing shortfall, and this will require a range of government and partnership models of delivery. It is clear that Bangs Street, as a project and as an early experiment within the GLM, has set a new bar for mixed-tenure development on public land. The alignment of public and private interest has created the preconditions for JCB and its project partners to execute a generous, open precinct, with permanent social homes of a high standard in a highly connected urban location.

— Andy Fergus is a Melbourne-based urban designer, design advocate and committee member of Urban Design Forum. Andy collaborates with government, ethical developers and community organisations to enable the delivery of successful places.

(FOOTNOTES)

(1) Kieran Rooney and Daniella White, "'Crushing demand' for social housing as Victoria's waiting list surges," *The Age*, March 22, 2025, theage.com.au/politics/victoria/crushing-demand-for-social-housing-as-victoria-s-waiting-list-surges-20250321-p5llh0.

(2) Kate Shaw et al., "Evaluation of the Kensington redevelopment and place management models," final report prepared for the Department of Human Services, January 2013.

Architect Jackson Clements Burrows Architects; Project team Tim Jackson, Chris Manderson, Ben Inman, Andy Clements, Ellie Gil, Carey Landwehr, Rob Chittleborough, Shailza Sharma, Matthew Girvan, Soledad Ferreyra, Bernadette Zajd, Weston Howell, Issa Assaad, Alison Palmer, Olivia Romert, Matteo Noviello, Kelly Jung, Phillip Culpan, Isabella Cohen, Greta McMillan, Jess Narsai, Tracey Tang, Nicholas Stephenson, Laura Culianez, Natasha Clough, Ignacio Galarraga; Builder and project manager Icon; Structural engineer Rincovitch Structural Engineers; Building services engineers Wrap Consulting Engineers; ESD engineers WSP; Landscape architect Rush Wright Associates; Urban planner Urbis; Building surveyor Codus (formerly PLP Building Surveyors); Fire safety compliance consultant Omnnii; Land surveyors Reeds Consulting

(OPPOSITE TOP) A new network of lanes and arcades stitches the island site into the surrounding context of Prahran.

(OPPOSITE BOTTOM) The alignment of public and private interest has enabled the project team to execute a generous precinct, with social and private homes of a high design standard in a desirable urban setting.

21 Bangs St
Building Entrance
Community Room
CHL Office

WHOLE BEAST BUTCHERY
FRESH POULTRY

Case studies: Built-to-rent developments

(WORDS BY) Alicia Pozniak

CASE STUDY 1

Realm Caulfield by ARM Architecture

CASE STUDY 2

Indi Sydney by Bates Smart

CASE STUDY 3

Nightingale Marrickville by SJB

CASE STUDY 4

Redfern Place by Hayball, Silvester Fuller, Architecture AND

(LEFT) Nightingale Marrickville's considered planning enables 54 small-footprint apartments in a shop-top style development. Photographer: Tom Roe.

Build-to-rent housing is diversifying from its upmarket origins to become what some see as a serious option for addressing housing access. Alicia Pozniak examines recent and anticipated exemplars to find out whose needs the model is fulfilling.

Over the past decade, build-to-rent (BTR) housing has emerged in Australia as a new development model touted as a potential solution to the housing crisis. The nascent sector has predominantly marketed its large-scale apartment complexes as upmarket rental offerings with the benefit of long-term tenancies and access to generous amenities and services. However, residents also pay above local rents to access these benefits, which places BTR out of reach for lower-income renters.

So while it is no silver bullet to the national housing crisis – there is, of course, no single solution – purpose-built rental accommodation (PBRA), of which BTR is one model, can provide a much-needed option for the growing third of Australians who cannot afford to buy a home. The recent passage of Commonwealth bills partially lifting tax burdens for BTR projects that include affordable housing are a welcome signal.[1] While some may argue that funding is better directed to the delivery of more public housing, analysis suggests this support can help level the playing field against build-to-sell development.[2]

BTR's emergence has also come with – and created a doorway to – broader institutional investment in Australian housing that could help stabilise PBRA across both private and not-for-profit sectors.

There are a number of PBRA models operating in Australia, which can be understood on a spectrum from non-profit to for-profit rental housing. This includes, at the non-profit end, public and community housing (including social and affordable housing by community providers), and at the for-profit end, student accommodation and market BTR, with a mix of tenures possible in-between.

In this highly complex policy space, now is a fitting time to take stock of the value BTR developments have brought to the Australian housing scene. The following projects demonstrate the inherent place-quality of BTR, its range of affordability, and how it harnesses good design as a long-term asset and future housing option for many Australians.

(CASE STUDY 1)

Realm Caulfield by ARM Architecture

(COUNTRY)	Bunurong
(LOCATION)	Naarm/Melbourne
(PHOTOGRAPHER)	Shannon McGrath
(SITE AREA)	14,650 m^2
(DWELLINGS IN PROJECT)	437
(DWELLINGS PER HECTARE)	298

(TOP)	Realm Caulfield offers a wide degree of shared spaces across its community-focused campus configuration, including a dog run.
(BOTTOM LEFT)	A central hub connects residents to a gym, pool, children's play areas, indoor and outdoor dining spots, a library, a theatre and coworking spaces.
(BOTTOM RIGHT)	Apartments feature generous layouts, including studios with large kitchens, creating permanent homes with ample space and functionality.

Architect ARM Architecture; Project team Neil Masterton, Amber Stewart, Chris Buchhorn, Ben Tole, Beth Solomon, Francis Reynolds, Davina Wilson, Jeremy Stewart, Ross Liddell, Lin Zhang; Builder and project manager Beck Property Group; Structural and civil engineer WSP; Services and traffic engineer Stantec; Fire engineer Omnii; Acoustic engineer Renzo Tonin and Associates; ESD consultant ARK Resources; Landscape design Tract; Urban planner Urban Planning Collective; Building surveyor Philip Chun; DDA consultant Before Compliance

In Melbourne, Australia's leading city for BTR development, BTR projects have diversified – thanks in part to state initiatives to boost supply – from their original, hyper-luxury offerings to more inclusive, mid-market and mixed-tenure options.

Among these is Realm Caulfield (2022), designed by ARM Architecture as a private market BTR development and mixed-use precinct in the traditionally low-rise, low-density suburb of Caulfield. The first BTR development in a suburban centre of Melbourne, the project has delivered 437 apartments in a community-focused campus configuration that establishes a through-site boulevard, public plaza and ground-floor retail, including a large supermarket.

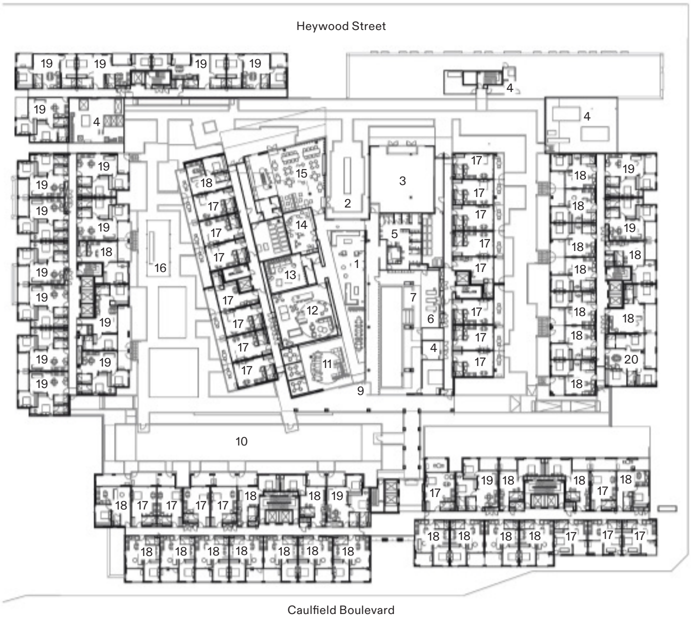
Residents are offered a plethora of shared amenities made possible through economies of scale, in exchange for the slightly higher-than-market rents. These are accessed from an expansive lobby on ground level, which features a cafe and concierge and which connects residents to a central podium-level hub. Here, communal open space with city views leads to the usual gym and pool, but also to children's play areas, a dog run, indoor and outdoor dining areas, a library, a theatre and coworking spaces. Apartments have been designed with gen-erous layouts, including studios with large kitchens, creating permanent homes with ample space and functionality.

Realm Caulfield builds on key principles ARM Architecture developed during its earlier Smith Collective project (2018, in partnership with Arkhefield and Archipelago) – Australia's first institutional BTR development, and the former site of the 2018 Commonwealth Games athletes' village. Emphasising a sense of home and community, the Realm Caulfield design softens the transition to higher density through landscaped pedestrian routes and varied building forms that respond to the surrounding streets. A stylishly neutral and robust materials palette contributes to an elevated identity somewhere between a curated resort-style complex and a contemporary apartment building.

While the development doesn't include affordable or social housing, it demonstrates how market-rate BTR housing can provide more accessible and desirable homes "that tenants are proud to belong to, and [which they] might not have otherwise been able to afford to buy into."[3]

(REALM CAULFIELD FLOOR PLANS)

1 Communal lounge
2 Outdoor social space
3 Yoga
4 Plant
5 Change rooms
6 Pool lounge
7 Spa
8 Pool
9 Entry
10 Outdoor dogwalk
11 Quiet study
12 Games room
13 Theatre
14 Kids play area
15 Dining room
16 Canopy over
17 Studio apartment
18 One-bedroom apartment
19 Two-bedroom apartment
20 Three-bedroom apartment

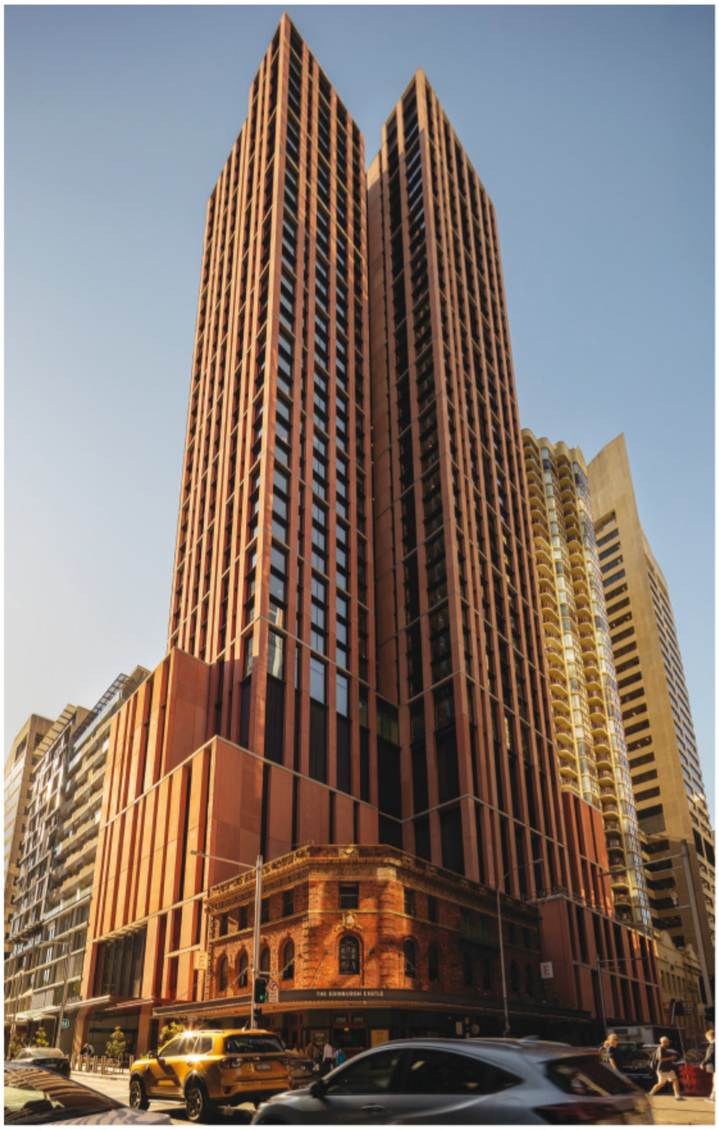


Realm Caulfield level three floor plan
1:1500

(CASE STUDY 2)

Indi Sydney by Bates Smart

(COUNTRY)	Gadigal
(LOCATION)	Warrane/Sydney
(PHOTOGRAPHER)	Felix Mooneeram
(SITE AREA)	1,710 m^2
(DWELLINGS IN PROJECT)	234
(DWELLINGS PER HECTARE)	1368



(ABOVE LEFT) Indi Sydney’s distinctive terracotta hue references the local brick context and provides warmth in its contemporary tower and streetscape expression.

(TOP RIGHT) Rather than prioritising penthouse units, the rooftop is reserved for shared living and dining areas with views of Sydney Harbour.

(BOTTOM RIGHT) Bates Smart’s “dematerialising” approach uses pre-cast and exposed structural concrete to reduce material layers and carbon footprint.

Architect Bates Smart; Project team Weddy Ang, David Birtwistle, Daniel Calvetti, Kingsley Castillo, Glen Chandler, Sarah Cooper, Alex Dircks, Diana Espiritu, May Fong, Stephen Green, Karen Kinsman, Mathieu Le Sueur, Matilda Leake, Alana Lee, Jesmine Lim, Li Vern Lim, Fraser McKay, Andrew McKie, Nimat Mistry, Tommy O’Daly, Mark Ojascastro, Nikolay Pechovski, Peter Pittas, Teghan Quigley, Seiya Sakai, Nikko Sudirman, Tommy Sutanto, Lucy Sutton, Philip Vivian, Malalai Youssofzay; Builder CPB Contractors; Project manager TSA Riley; Structural engineer TTW; Civil and traffic engineer Aurecon; MEP and building services engineer LCI Consultants; Fire engineer Warringtonfire; Wind engineer CPP Wind; Landscape design Sue Barnsley Design; Urban planner Urbis; Accessibility and BCA engineer Philip Chun; Acoustic consultant Renzo Tonin and Associates; ESD consultant Cundall; Facade engineer Inhabit; Heritage consultant GBA Heritage; Pool consultant Aquatic One; Signage design Buro North; Waterproofing consultant Waterproofing Integrity; Photography Felix Mooneeram, Ethan Rohloff, Chris Cook

Sydney has not experienced the same burst of private BTR interest as Melbourne, with higher land costs discouraging the model. However, different forms of government support have helped a few recent projects stack up in the financially tight market.

Indi Sydney (2024), designed by Bates Smart and developed by Investa with owner Oxford Properties, is the first purpose-built, market-housing BTR development in Sydney's CBD. Located over the southern end of the new Gadigal station – one of several over-station developments across the city's new metro sites – the project leveraged the site's public-private development context to bring 234 new apartments to the local rental market amid housing supply shortages.

With minimal local precedents to look to, the Bates Smart team researched overseas BTR offerings, with a particular interest in the range of amenities that distinguish the development model. An expected household mix of empty nesters and young professionals drove the curation of communal facilities with a focus on wellness and comfortable gathering spaces. In lieu of penthouse units, the rooftop prioritises shared and bookable indoor–outdoor living and dining areas with views of Sydney Harbour. A wellness floor with a yoga room, saunas and an indoor pool on level six takes advantage of the dramatic spatial quality created by the exposed concrete transfer structure. A concierge and Indi Sydney app further enhance the tenant customer experience with on-call support and services.

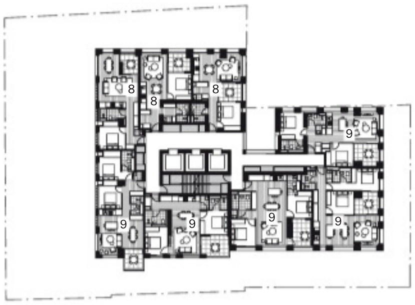
Apartments cater to a range of household types, with larger three-bed units and outdoor terraces on the podium popular with families, and smaller one- and two-bedroom units located above. Despite a compact building footprint, spaciousness is prioritised, with balconies recessed as outdoor rooms that extend living areas, moved to corners for dual aspect. A series of window types with fine steel details creates spatial variety and brings a domestic quality to the apartments.

Quality design for amenity and building longevity was central to Indi Sydney's development. Bates Smart's "dematerialising" approach uses GRC, pre-cast and exposed structural concrete to reduce material layers, carbon footprint and maintenance, while also referencing the properties of the local brick vernacular. This is reflected in the building's distinctive terracotta hue, providing warmth in its contemporary tower and streetscape expression.

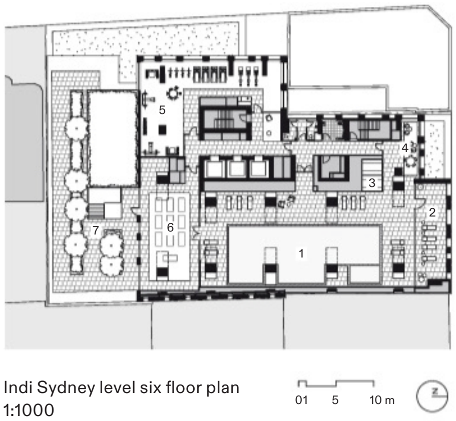
The project boldly harnesses the opportunity to design for BTR both as an enduring architectural artefact and as part of a wider network of housing built as urban infrastructure.

(FLOOR PLANS)

1 Pool
2 Terrace
3 Saunas
4 Reading
5 Gymnasium
6 Yoga studio
7 Courtyard
8 One-bedroom apartment
9 Two-bedroom apartment



Indi Sydney level fourteen to thirty-four floor plan
1:1000

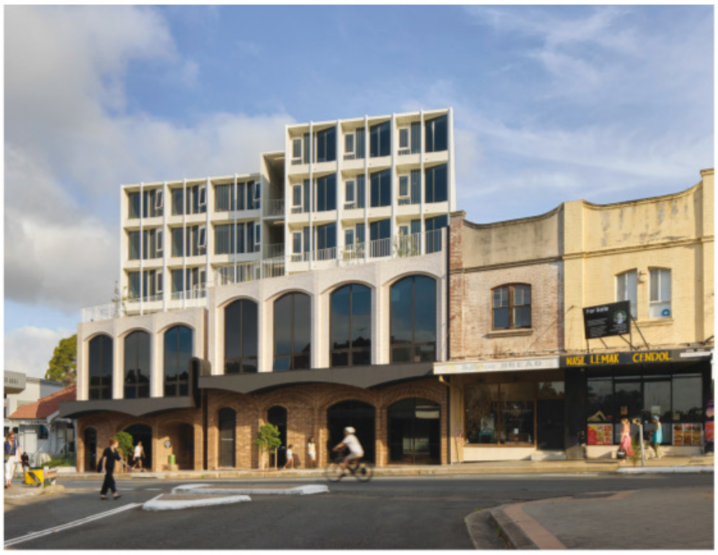


Indi Sydney level six floor plan
1:1000

(CASE STUDY 3)

Nightingale Marrickville by SJB

(COUNTRY)	Wangal, Kameygal and Bediagal
(LOCATION)	Warrane/Sydney
(PHOTOGRAPHER)	Tom Roe
(SITE AREA)	766 m^2
(DWELLINGS IN PROJECT)	54
(DWELLINGS PER HECTARE)	704



(ABOVE LEFT) Apartment finishes and fittings are composed of sustainable, low-cost materials and feature adaptable designs.

(TOP RIGHT) The plan takes advantage of public transport along with share-car access to avoid the need for dedicated parking.

(BOTTOM RIGHT) Generous communal spaces offset the modest apartments, providing residents places to gather, cook and access shared appliances.

Architect SJB; Project team Adam Haddow, Gabrielle Suhr, Juan Muñoz-Tamayo, Charlotte Wilson, Jemima Frank, Nadia Vidor, Nemanja Stanar; Builder CD Construction Group; Project manager and building surveyor Icon; Structural and civil engineer M plus G Consulting; Fire engineer, ESD and BASIX consultant E-Lab; Mechanical, electrical and hydraulic engineer JN Consulting Engineers; Landscape design Dangar Barin Smith; Urban planner, PCA and BCA consultant City Plan; Traffic consultant Stantec Traffic management Optimus Traffic Management

Taking a similar pared-back design approach to Indi Sydney is Nightingale Marrickville (2024), Nightingale Housing's first Sydney development. Created in partnership with Fresh Hope Communities and designed by SJB, it sits at the opposite end of the BTR-PBRA spectrum to Indi Sydney – as affordable housing. Completed in November 2024, the project's use of unique NSW planning provisions enabled 54 small-footprint apartments to be delivered in a shop-top style development in the diverse inner-city suburb of Marrickville, with rents at a minimum 20% lower than market rates.

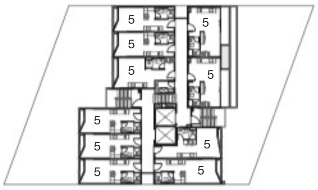
Residents apply through a ballot process run by Fresh Hope Communities, which allocates half of all units to priority groups including First Nations Australians, single women over 55, and people with a disability. The site was provided by Fresh Hope Communities, saving land purchase costs, and with other development costs minimised in innovative and sustainable ways. Close proximity to the local train station, along with bike storage and shared cars, saved the need to excavate for underground parking. Exposed concrete soffits feature ceiling fans in lieu of airconditioning, and glazing was minimised to reduce heat load and loss. Internal finishes and fittings are composed of sustainable, low-cost materials, and are multi-functional to meet different design needs. Rooftop solar panels help generate electricity for the building.

Two generous communal spaces offset the modest apartments, providing residents places to gather, cook larger meals and access shared appliances. Communal laundries, drying areas and an outdoor terrace with vegetable garden further extend the shared living environment and foster social connection day to day. An on-site manager provides residents with support services, and further opportunities to connect with each other and the local community through activities tied to the ground-floor shopfront spaces.

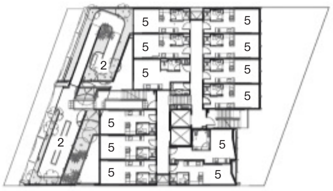
The carefully designed balance of private and shared spaces reflects the Nightingale Housing philosophy to reduce its living footprint by sharing more of the things typically provided for exclusive use in individual homes – a takeaway that can help inform how to make Australian housing fairer for all.

(NIGHTINGALE MARRICKVILLE FLOOR PLANS)

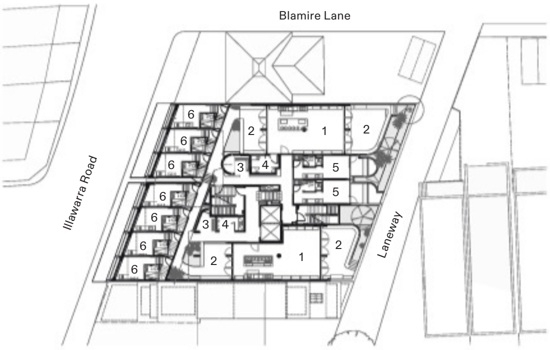
1 Communal space
2 Communal outdoor space
3 Communal laundry
4 Communal drying court
5 Studio apartment (Teilhaus)
6 Mezzanine studio apartment (Teilhaus)



Nightingale Marrickville level five floor plan
1:1000



Nightingale Marrickville level two floor plan
1:1000

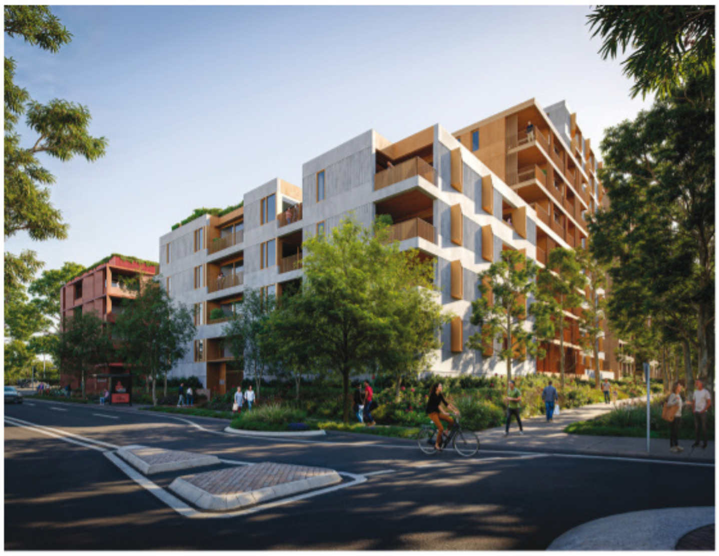


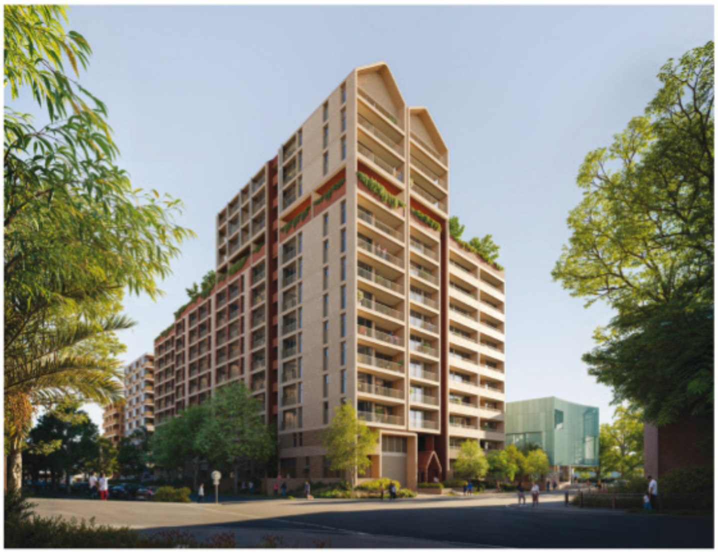
Nightingale Marrickville level one floor plan
1:1000

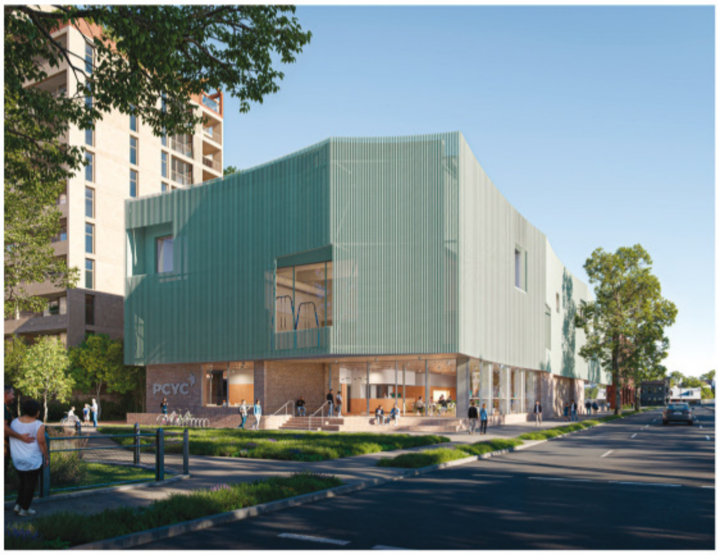
(CASE STUDY 4)

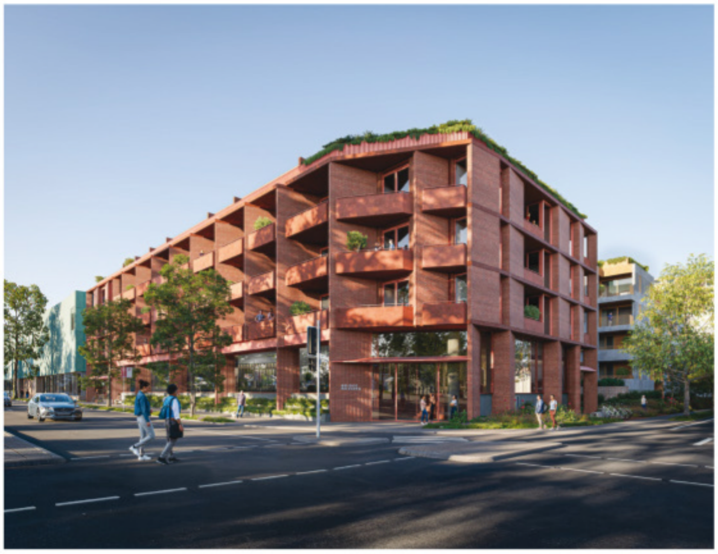
Redfern Place by Hayball, Silvester Fuller, Architecture AND

(COUNTRY)	Gadigal
(LOCATION)	Warrane/Sydney
(IMAGERY)	DIM Studio
(SITE AREA)	10,850 m²
(DWELLINGS IN PROJECT)	355
(DWELLINGS PER HECTARE)	327









(TOP LEFT)	Hayball's vision for a community of communities flows across the masterplan's scales, which respond to the surrounding neighbourhood.
(TOP RIGHT)	Silvester Fuller won a design competition to develop the tallest of Redfern Place's four main buildings.
(BOTTOM LEFT)	The design includes a new community hub and facilities designed by Architecture AND to replace the area's ageing PCYC.
(BOTTOM RIGHT)	A new head office for community housing provider and precinct developer Bridge Housing is also included.

Architects Hayball, Silvester Fuller, Architecture AND; Builder Hickory; Project manager Capella Capital; Structural and civil engineer BG and E; Mechanical, electrical and hydraulic engineer Neuron; Landscape design Aspect Studios; Urban planner Ethos Urban, Beam Planning; Building surveyor McKenzie Group; Designing with Country consultant Yerrabingin; Facade engineer Inhabit; ESD consultant Atelier Ten; Acoustic consultant SLR

Redfern Place is an upcoming and long-awaited redevelopment of public housing land which was envisaged in 2018 as a first-of-its-kind BTR proposition by the NSW government. The urban block project originally incorporated a proposed split of 70% market rental housing and 30% social and affordable housing as part of an effort to diversify the renewal of government housing estates. Since then, a successful tender by community housing provider Bridge Housing and partner Capella Capital, with Hayball as executive architect, has seen the transformation of this proposition to exclusively deliver 355 social, affordable and disability support rental homes, including a proportion for the local First Nations community. A new head office for Bridge Housing, with a community hub and facilities to replace the ageing PCYC, will also be created right across from Redfern Park and Oval. Construction is planned to begin in 2025 following state planning assessment, with an expected 2028 completion.

Hayball's vision for the site is as a community of communities within Redfern and on Country. This flows across the masterplan's scales, from the arrangement of the four main buildings in response to the surrounding neighbourhood, to the location of communal open spaces, and through to the layout of individual buildings and diverse homes. A design competition for the tallest building was awarded to Silvester Fuller, while Architecture AND was engaged to design the new community centre, and Aspect Studios brought on for landscape design.

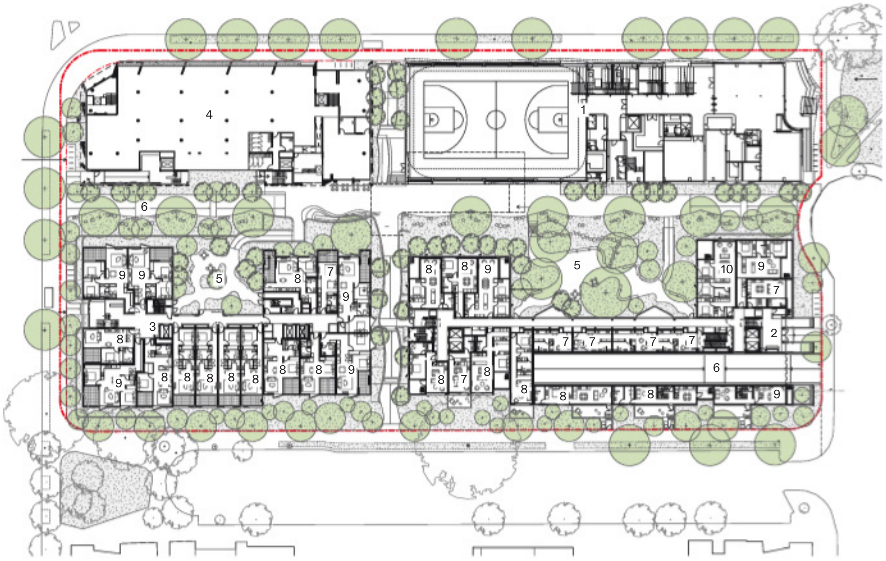
Bridge Housing provided the unique opportunity for Hayball's team to consult with potential future residents in the design process. This informed the designing-with-Country approach, including colour selections, breezeway and unit layout, and protocols for the community centre.

Hayball's work to support Redfern Place includes the parallel implementing of a monetisation framework known as the SIGMAH (Social Infrastructure and Green Measures for Affordable Housing) calculation tool, developed by Swinburne University, the Australian Social Value Bank, and Community Housing Industry Association to help forecast both the operating costs and the wider benefits of social housing developments. Its aim is to help advocate for and strengthen business cases for new social and affordable housing developments, ensuring that Redfern Place becomes a permanent catalyst for housing system change.

— Alicia Pozniak is an architect and principal policy officer in NSW government with a research interest in housing, urban development and the socio-political conditions that shape the built environment. The opinions expressed in this article are the author's own.

(REDFERN PLACE MASTER PLAN)

1 Site one, PCYC by Architecture And
2 Site two, affordable housing by Silvester Fuller
3 Site three, social housing by Hayball
4 Site four, bridge and social housing by Hayball
5 Communal garden
6 Vehicle access
7 Studio apartment
8 One-bedroom apartment
9 Two-bedroom apartment
10 Three-bedroom apartment



Redfern Place master plan
1:1500

(FOOTNOTES)

(1) Benn Dorrington, "Affordable rentals on way after new rules unveiled," *The Australian*, 3 April 2025, 21.

(2) Hal Pawson et al., "Build to rent in Australia: Product feasibility and affordable housing contribution," Landcom, July 2019

(3) *A place to call home*, ARM Architecture, (ARM Architecture, 2023).

Hope Street Housing

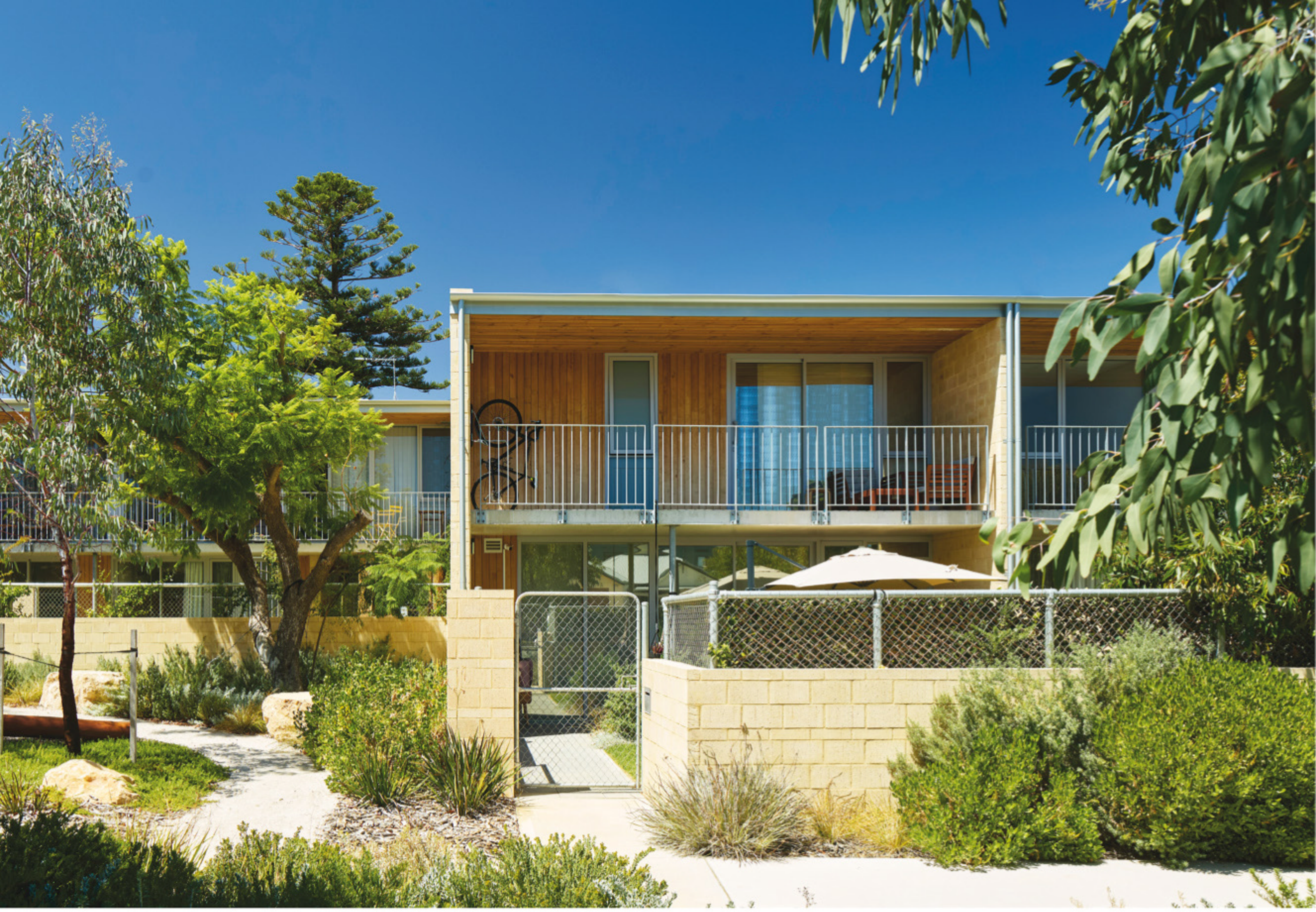
(COUNTRY)	Whadjuk Noongar
(LOCATION)	Boorloo/Perth
(REVIEWER)	Emily Van Eyk
(PHOTOGRAPHER)	Robert Frith/Acorn Photo

(ARCHITECT)

Officer Woods Architects in collaboration with MDC Architects

●

TYPE OF SUPPLY	Private residential
SITE AREA	5,489 m²
DWELLINGS IN PROJECT	28
DWELLINGS PREVIOUSLY ON SITE	6
DENSITY (DWELLINGS PER HECTARE)	51
CAR SPACES	30
HEIGHT (STOREYS)	2
CLOSEST PUBLIC TRANSPORT	500 m



(PREVIOUS) Hope Street Housing articulates the streetscape with a rhythmic composition of brickwork shifting back and forth with cadence across the site.

(ABOVE) Permeable paving leaves space for planting across every available verge, edge and corner.

(RIGHT) The adaptive design of 28 units brings a welcome density to a site previously zoned for a handful of single-detached homes.

The inspired planning behind a plant-filled, forward-thinking complex, built on a site once destined for low-density houses, shows how architects can step in as leaders in the housing crisis.

Hope Street Housing by Officer Woods Architects in collaboration with MDC Architects is the sort of project that gives cause to politicians to start announcing townhouses as the solution to the housing crisis. It is the sort of project that is equally good for developers, residents and community – high amenity, cost effective, win-win. It could be a pattern book all of its own: go no further, the answer is here.

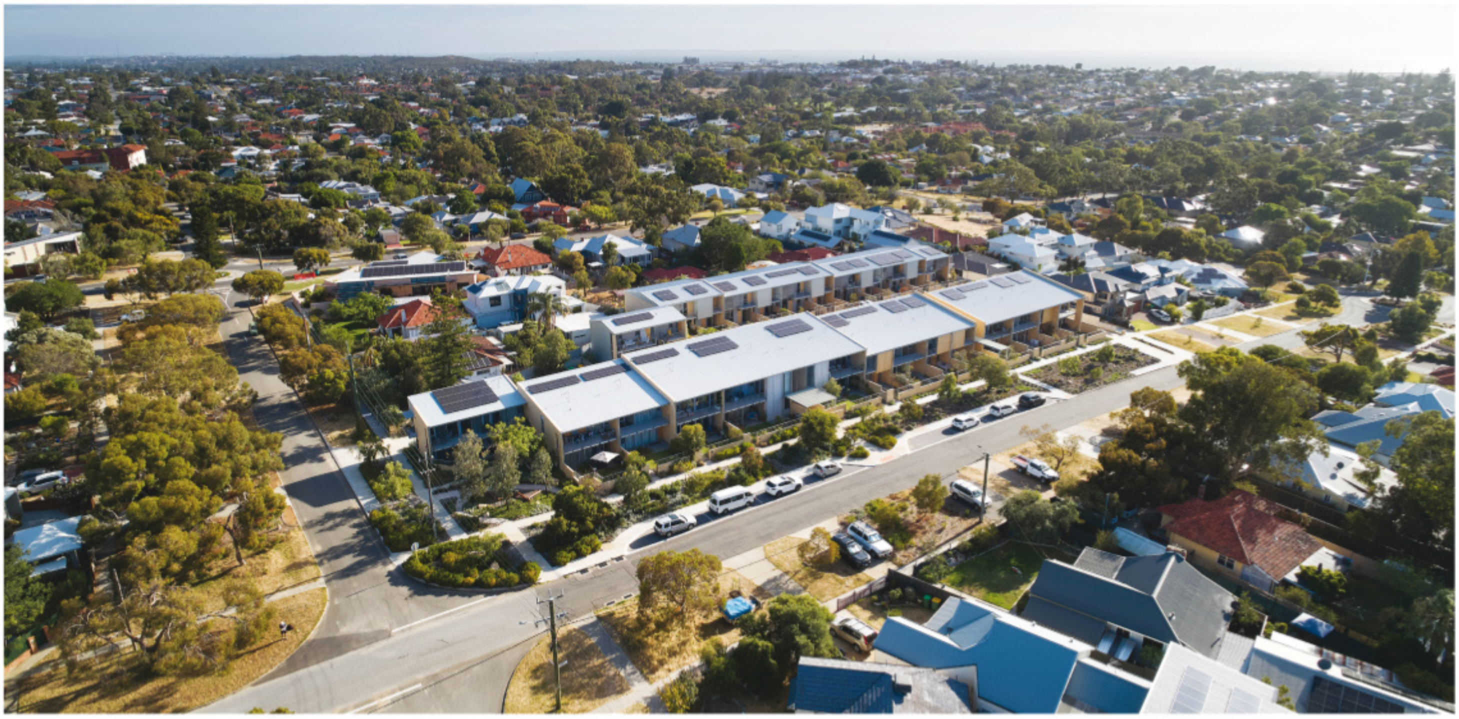
It presents a long-term supply solution that recognises the demand for astute, affordable design that respects neighbourhood needs, and manages a high yield thanks to optimised materials and planning. It adapts to ongoing climate risk with its excellent passive design, and mitigates future risk with its approach to vegetation, porosity and long-lasting materials. It is also a joy to be in; it's just plain uplifting.

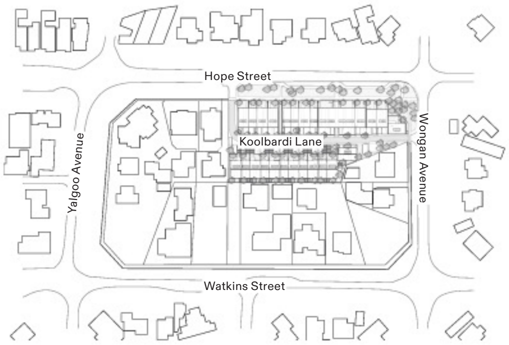
The site in White Gum Valley, a few kilometres from the centre of Fremantle, was originally zoned low-density residential and destined to become a series of single-detached, large volume project homes: two-storey, double brick, lots of paving – a suburban death knell for density and climate. MDC Architects founder Matt Delroy-Carr saw the true opportunity in the space and approached developer Salander Property, who acquired the land. An emerging practice at the time, MDC enlisted the lauded Officer Woods Architects to collaborate on an ambitious plan, along with landscape architects Aspect Studios. Each has separately described the process as a true collaboration.

The front-end process was hefty, requiring a considerable plan to justify amalgamation and upzoning before design could even commence. Multiple community consultations were conducted and the opinions of neighbours taken seriously in the scheme. While the City of Fremantle was pro-design – on board for a dense outcome as long as it was a good out-come – it's clear that there were many hoops compared to a usual project. A usual project would not have almost tripled the predicted density for the site, however.

Under the original zoning, the site would have likely offered, at best, 10 dwellings. The new Hope Street scheme has resulted in 28 townhouse and walk-up-apartment dwellings, while featuring 60 percent open space (including 40 percent deep planting zone) and vegetation in every remaining crack. Though perhaps not the streamlined planning process often touted as the way forward, it helped hone the greater sense of direction and goals integral to the high-quality architecture that emerged. The support of the intrepid Salander Property was also invaluable.

By using an adaptive townhouse and apartment design – terrace iterations that flex to work within the slightly irregular dimensions of the lot – the planning is able to push programming on the site to the max (it seems like every square inch of land is dwelling or planting) while also achieving northern orientation and substantial gardens. The iterations appeal to buyer diversity, offering seven different arrangements of highly rationalised, modular dwellings. The variety also satisfies a planning requirement of articulation of the streetscape, executed here with a rhythmic composition, brick coursing subtly shifting back and forth with cadence across the site.




Hope Street
Koolbardi Lane
Yalgoo Avenue
Wongan Avenue
Watkins Street
0 10 50 m
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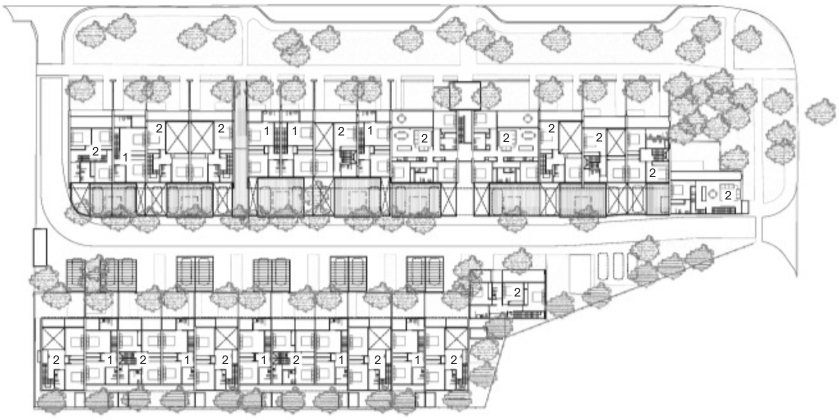
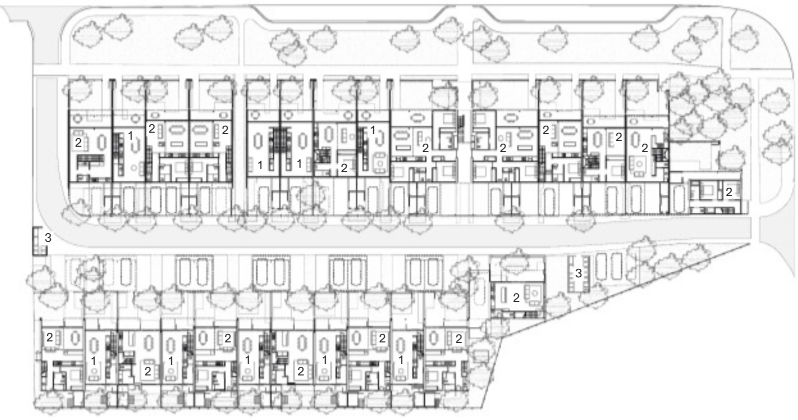
Site plan
1:5000

(FLOOR PLAN)

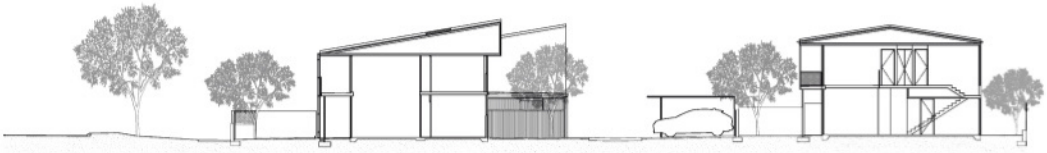
1 Two-bed dwelling
2 Three-bed dwelling
3 Bin store



Level one floor plan
1:1250



Ground floor plan
1:1250



Section
1:500

(ABOVE) Interior material choices feature warm touches while remaining performance-heavy, keeping maintenance needs low and thermal comfort high.

(RIGHT) Variations in the townhouse design have allowed seven different arrangements of highly rationalised, modular dwellings across the site.

The laneway space running through the centre of the site feels functional but friendly, giving residents enough space to manoeuvre easily, without creating a bland and exposed pathway. Traffic is one-way, a small move that allows pedestrians to take precedence and makes for a neat, predictable and safe environment. "Small moves" are a common theme that Officer Woods director Jennie Officer points to throughout the site. But if these "minor" design choices seem small in isolation, they emerge so frequently that the site feels almost saturated with better outcomes, creating a project that is acutely interconnected and responsive. There are multiple benefits for each decision. Where solid walls are not functionally necessary, the masonry is sliced, punctured and reduced in height, allowing the secondary benefit of subtle but varied passive surveillance. The downpipes advantageously slot into these voids, also making the streetscape softer and more congenial to the requisite amenity. And while the townhouse is the best outcome for passive solar design, it's also the best outcome for yield. A collection of small, mutually benefiting items, but a mighty sum of its parts.

Porosity and open space are important in the plan, with permeable paving, open car shelters, and meshes and screens prolific. Shared structures and spatial arrangements throughout the site offer residents further opportunities to engender a feeling of community. One of the most welcoming spaces is the corner public garden, where Friday gin and tonics on the logs are a thing. This consolidated public space gives a big anchor to the ribbons of planting throughout – around edges and in-between dwellings, between dwellings and footpaths, in strips through the main access way. Vegetation is plugged everywhere it can be, providing softness and enhancing privacy. The designers have emphasised the key role that landscape plays in good housing, and that the planting allowance for Hope Street actually increased for stage two of the project. Delroy-Carr points out that the developer is also looking to increasing its budget allowance for landscape in future projects as it was found to be an integral factor in some residents' decisions to buy at Hope Street. The cost of increased planting is not really a cost at all, it's a fiscal investment.

On the subject of cost, the development is profitable. Costs were kept low through material selection, hardcore rationalisation of planning and clever detailing. The outcome is spacious, full of greenery, light and air. The design identified the inherent amenity of the site and used it to full advantage: trees were retained, views to other green spaces emphasised. Even limestone unintentionally excavated during construction was adapted into the gardens (and the leftovers gratefully taken by the city). Maintenance needs are low and thermal comfort is high, with all dwellings achieving at least a 7.5 star NatHERS rating and many reaching more than nine.

Hope Street is a building that can take the mess of life and still look fresh, demonstrating that affordable is not mean. Material choices and detailing are driven by usability, but the aesthetics equate to an easeful existence. While simple and performance-heavy, the interior spaces are still beautiful, with soft timber for warmth, or bricks cleverly flipped inside-out to purposefully hide the "fashionable" side for a uniform finish. The uncomplicated aesthetic might be a challenge for those set on more decorated material palettes, but the residents of Hope Street love it.

In his 2023 *Quarterly Essay*, "The Great Divide: Australia's Housing Mess and How to Fix It," financial journalist Alan Kohler summarises several changes needed from the supply side: site consolidation, rethinking yield, and local authorities that assist, rather than resist, development. Hope Street does all these things, and shows that even if architects cannot control tax breaks, they can step in as robust leaders while creating joyous, amenity-rich homes.

This is architecture that works hard, no stone unturned, for the greater good, and residents have described living here as a joy. It is moving that all this focus on being as fiscally, climatically and functionally sound as possible, can still result in joy.

— Emily Van Eyk is a lecturer at the University of Western Australia, and operates Mt Eyk, focusing on economic and social responsibility using delight as a key design tool.

(OPPOSITE TOP) Porosity and open space characterise the plan, with open car shelters, meshes and screens prolific throughout.

(OPPOSITE BOTTOM) Gardens feel secure and private, with just enough visibility from the street for a sense of community.

Architect Officer Woods Architects, MDC Architects; Project team Matt Delroy Carr, Jennifer Officer, Trent Woods, Olivera Nenadovic, Olivia Webb, Bryan Donnelly, Ryan Berut; Builder Bruce Construction Design; Structural engineer Andreotta Cardenosa Consulting Engineers; Town planner Element Advisory; Landscape consultant Aspect Studios; Developer Salander Property

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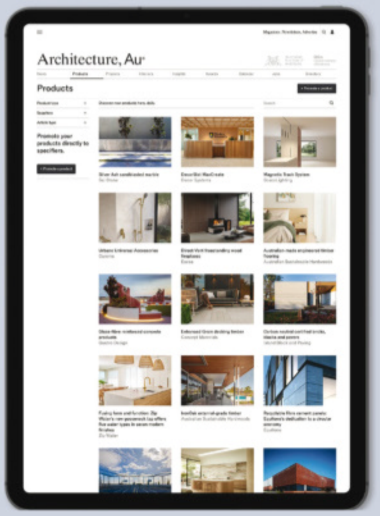

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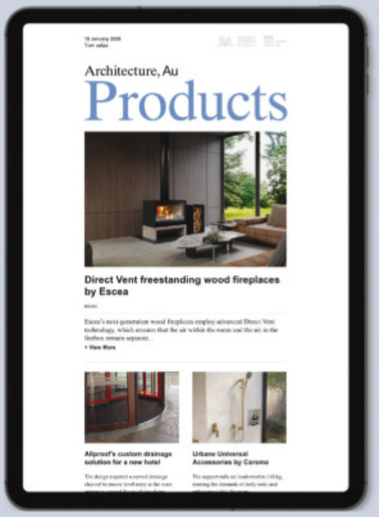

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ARCHITECTUREAU AWARD FOR SOCIAL IMPACT

(JURY OVERVIEW)

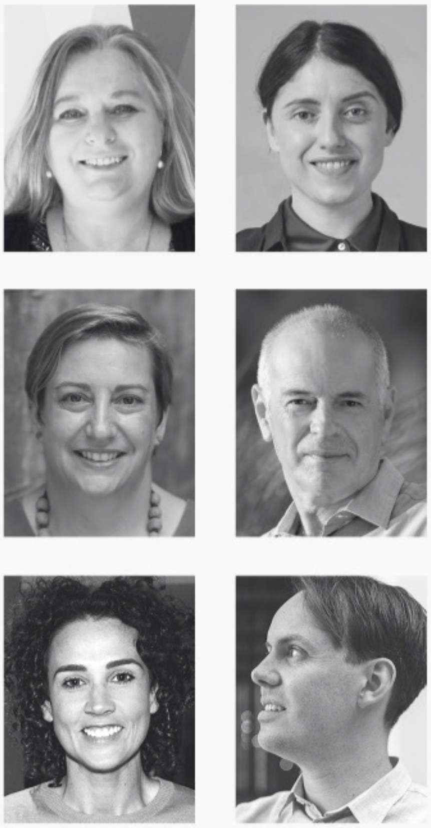
Now in its third iteration, the ArchitectureAu Award for Social Impact is gaining momentum in its aim to create a catalogue of exemplar projects that demonstrate “good design, doing good.” Measuring tangible social impact hasn’t got any easier, but it is pleasing to see the many ways that architecture can make a difference to society.

This year’s joint winners each respond to two major societal challenges of our time: chronic homelessness (Habilis by Collins and Turner), and the need to acknowledge the past injustices and ongoing inequalities faced by Indigenous Australians (Munarra Centre for Regional Excellence by ARM Architecture). Both projects are equally impressive examples of the shifting mode of practice of architecture, where social value is considered at every stage – from designing from lived experience or via a genuine collaboration with community, to considering long-term outcomes and opportunities for those who use the buildings.

Authenticity and empathy were integral to the success of these projects, as was taking the time to listen and build relationships. This approach is also clearly evident in two of the commended projects – Nungalinya by Incidental Architecture, and the Bhattedanda Village Stupa Sanitation and Caretaker Project by Paul Pholeros Foundation in collaboration with Jasper Ludewig, Harry Catterns, David Donald and Shane Marshall. Nungalinya was a staged design process that allowed for feedback and learnings to be incorporated into the newer buildings, while the Bhattedanda Village saw a strong focus on community up-skilling and an approach centring deep community engagement.

Our final commended project, George Street Transformation by City of Sydney, is an impressive example of impact at immense scale, enriching everyday experiences of the many daily visitors to Sydney’s CBD. This urban project is about maximisation of public value, as opposed to strictly “social” value, but our jury nevertheless recognised that this level of impact on pedestrian experience could not be overlooked. Our shortlist of 26 projects continues to broaden this perspective, demonstrating the diversity of ways that social and public value can be determined. Congratulations to all those recognised in this year’s awards.

— Katelin Butler, jury chair, 2025 ArchitectureAU Award for Social Impact



The jury (clockwise from top left) Helen Barrie, senior research fellow, Centre for Markets, Values and Inclusion, University of South Australia; Amelia Borg, co-director, Sibling Architecture; Shaneen Fantin, architect and researcher; Philip Thalis, principal, Hill Thalis Architecture and Urban Projects; Katelin Butler (jury chair), editorial director, Architecture Media; Rory Hyde (jury convenor), associate professor of architecture, University of Melbourne

Presenting partner

THE UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE

Joint winner

Habilis
by Collins and Turner

(COUNTRY)	Gadigal
(LOCATION)	Warrane/Sydney, NSW
(PHOTOGRAPHER)	Katherine Lu

(JURY CITATION)

Habilis is a deeply humane and sensitive architectural response to one of society's most urgent challenges: chronic homelessness and mental illness. Through the thoughtful adaptive reuse of a disused industrial site, this project redefines what social housing can be – in both form and function.

The project's 20 single-occupancy units are thoughtfully arranged around a shared courtyard, fostering a sense of belonging while allowing for personal space and privacy. By embedding essential mental health services on site, the project ensures residents receive consistent, accessible support, enabling better health outcomes and long-term stability.

The jury commends the team for prioritising lived experience in the design process. Every aspect of Habilis reflects a deep understanding of the barriers faced by its future residents: from safety and autonomy to the importance of connection and continuity of care.

Habilis challenges the notion of what social housing can be. It rejects short-term solutions in favour of permanence and purpose. It provides a replicable model that demonstrates the profound potential of architecture to address entrenched disadvantage – not through grand gestures, but through quiet, considered design that centres people first.

Habilis is an exemplar of architectural excellence with profound social impact. It offers a powerful and practical model for future social housing – demonstrating that design, when deployed with care and purpose, can be a tool for healing and hope.

— Habilis is reviewed by Andrew Scott in this issue of *Architecture Australia* (see page 20).

> "All of the residents have expressed their satisfaction and delight with the units and with the complex. Visitors from the housing and health sector have been glowing in their assessment of the outcome."
> — Olav Nielssen, chair, Habilis Housing

Architect Collins and Turner; Project team Penny Collins, Huw Turner, Barbara Lau, Andy Carlsen, David Janson; Builder Structure Australia; Project manager Neoscape; Structural engineer Structure Consulting Engineers; Mechanical, electrical, hydraulic and ESP engineers ACOR Consultants; BCA consultant Trevor R Howse and Associates; Landscape architect Gallagher Studio; Access consultant Inclusive Places

Joint winner

Munarra Centre for Regional Excellence by ARM Architecture

(COUNTRY)	Yorta Yorta
(LOCATION)	Shepparton, Vic
(PHOTOGRAPHER)	Peter Bennetts

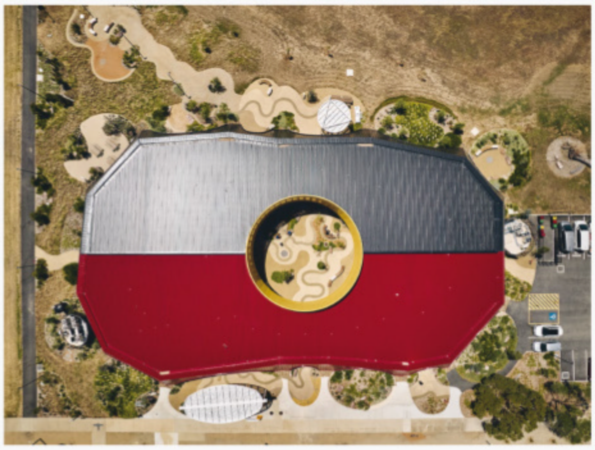
(JURY CITATION)

The Munarra Centre for Regional Excellence, on Yorta Yorta Country in Shepparton, is a landmark of architectural self-determination, created through a best-practice co-design process led by First Nations community members. The centre provides a world-class hub for education, sport and community gathering: in addition to hosting the Academy of Sport, Health and Education, and the local Rumbalara Football Netball Club, it provides spaces for community meetings, co-working and events, and facilitates culturally responsive education, Indigenous health initiatives and pathways to employment.

Construction of the centre exceeded social impact targets: 10.8% of total expenditure went to Victorian Aboriginal businesses, with 77 Victorian Aboriginal businesses engaged and more than 27,000 hours of work estimated to have been completed by disadvantaged Victorians. Of the project team and workforce, 32.9% and 19.4% identified as Victorian Aboriginal, respectively.

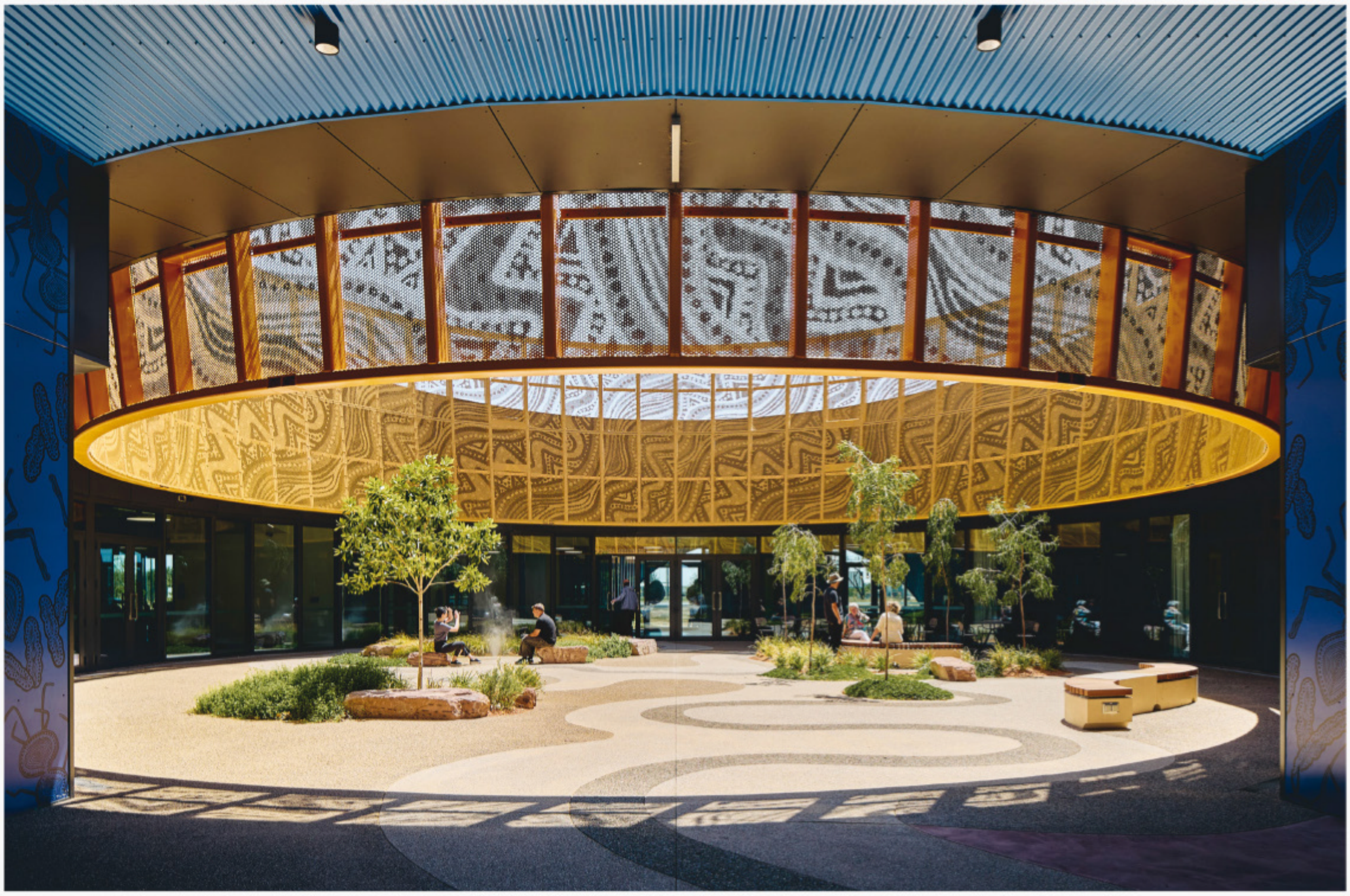
The architects acted effectively as facilitators, rather than drivers, of the community's vision, allowing an environment of collaboration to thrive. The result is a building that responds to community need, with identity embedded in every design element: a striking, flag-like form that maintains a link to the surrounding landscape, with a ground-reaching roof that brings to mind a shield or shell, evoking protection, unity and connection to Country. The design balances this with a welcoming porosity, creating spaces for gathering and refuge within, including yarning areas, Elders' rooms and family support areas.

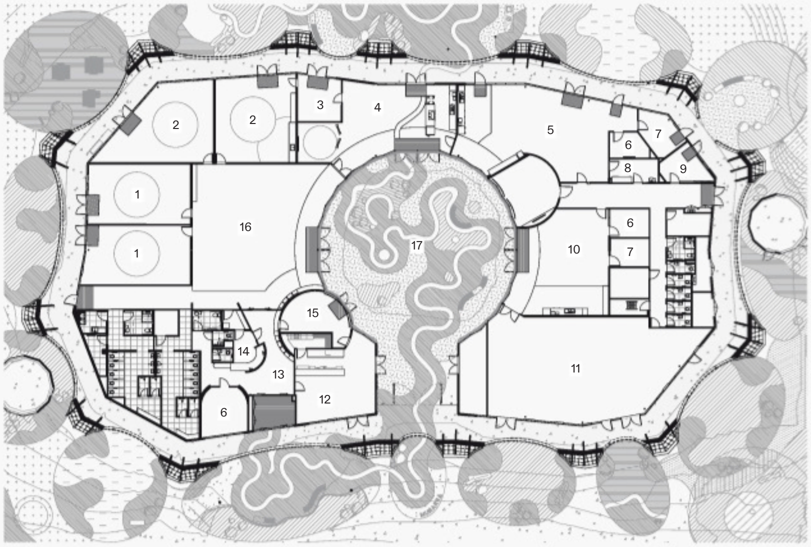
Munarra is a testament to the empowering potential of community-led architecture, and reminds us that the best spaces are created by those who will use them.



> "Munarra is a place for mob to come together, but it is also a place for everyone. The architecture and landscape invite storytelling in a way that feels natural, almost sacred, reinforcing the traditions and knowledge of this Country. We are incredibly proud of this place and eager to share it with others."
> — Tom O'Reilly, interim CEO, Munarra Limited

Architect ARM Architecture; Project team Andrew Lilleyman, Jesse Jud; Landscape architect Bush Projects; Structural, civil and services engineers WSP; Quantity surveyor Plancost Australia; Universal access consultant Jensen Hughes; Art curation Spacecraft Studio, Kaiela Arts; Wayfinding Vivid Wayfinding; Kitchen planning The Mack Group

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(FLOOR PLAN)

1 Teaching
2 Peer-to-peer learning
3 Child friendly study
4 Student lounge
5 Staff office
6 Meeting room
7 Office
8 Sick bay
9 Yarning
10 Co-working space
11 Cold shell
12 Cafe
13 Foyer
14 Reception
15 Elders/parents
16 Resource commons/library
17 Courtyard

Floor plan
1:750

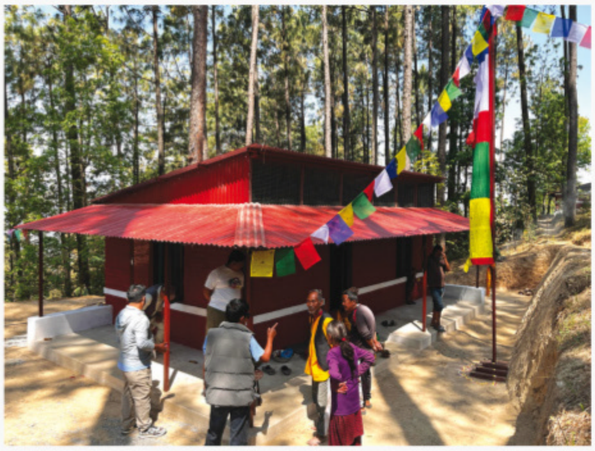
Commendation

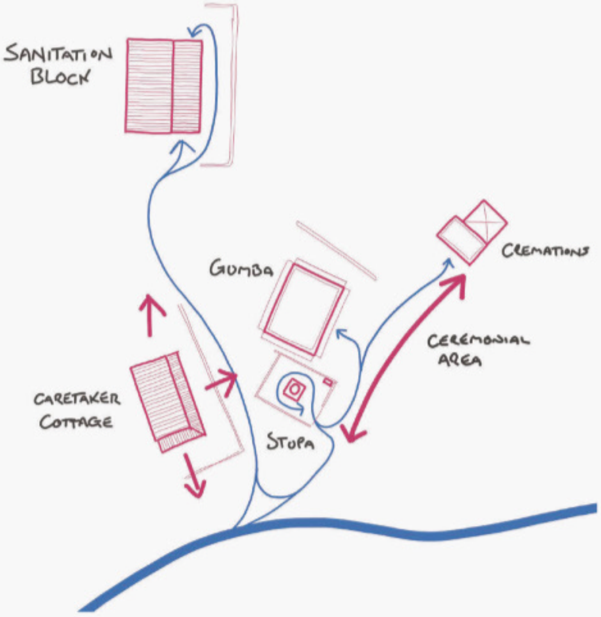
Bhattedanda Village Stupa Sanitation and Caretaker Project by Paul Pholeros Foundation in collaboration with Jasper Ludewig, Harry Catterns, David Donald and Shane Marshall

(LOCATION) Dhulikhel, Nepal
(PHOTOGRAPHER) Sandra Meihubers

(JURY CITATION)
The Bhattedanda Village Stupa Sanitation and Caretaker Project is a thoughtful and deceptively simple design that demonstrates an intelligent response to the complex site challenges of the Nepalese environment, including difficult terrain, remoteness and extreme weather conditions. It exemplifies the power of deep community engagement – prioritising local needs, values and lived experiences to guide design and implementation. The project's clever use of local resources, combined with a strong focus on community up-skilling, has not only addressed critical sanitation needs in the village but also empowered residents through active participation in the design, construction and maintenance of the project.

This initiative stands out as a model of socially engaged architecture. It advances the discipline by fostering self-determination, improving environmental health outcomes, and significantly enhancing the community's sense of dignity and ownership.





Site plan
Not to scale

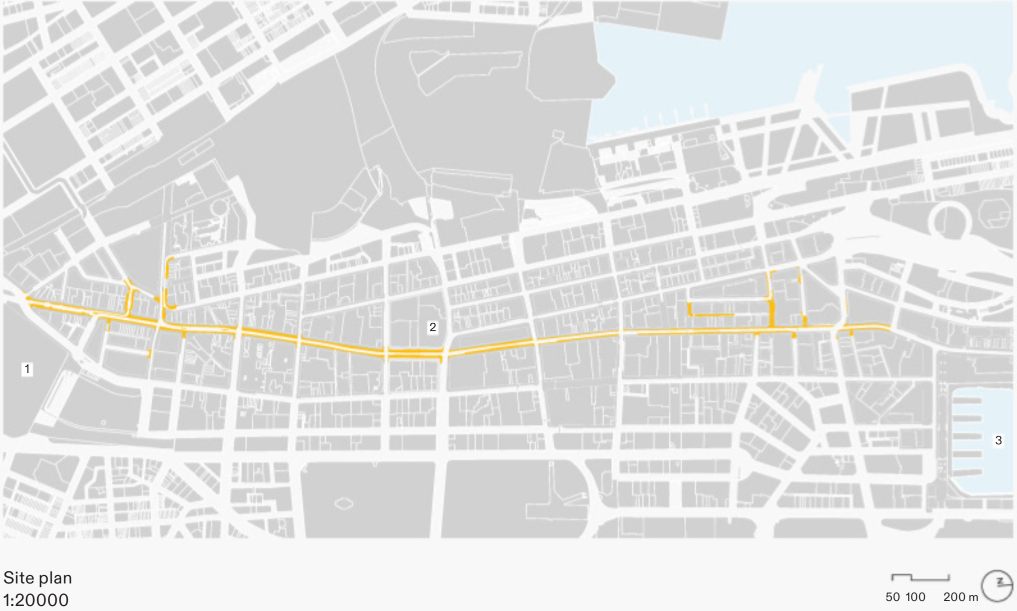
Project team Paul Pholeros Foundation with Jasper Ludewig, Harry Catterns, David Donald, Shane Marshall; Project coordinator Sandra Meihubers; Project manager Surya Lama, Prem Lama

Commendation

George Street Transformation by City of Sydney

(COUNTRY)	Gadigal
(LOCATION)	Warrane/Sydney, NSW
(PHOTOGRAPHER)	Richard Glover

(JURY CITATION)
The transformation of George Street is one of Australia's most significant urban projects, adding enormous social value to a critical public space. The long-called-for mission to reinstate light rail in the Sydney city centre was married with the creation of a pedestrian spine for the city, spurred by a brief that called for a street made for people over cars. Once a vehicle-clogged road, George Street has been transformed into over 20,000 square metres of considered pedestrian space – a calmer, civilising experience abundant with seats, new street planting, high-quality paving, and space to stroll and linger. It's an exemplar of people-focused planning, showing how design can enrich cities and the lives within them.



Site plan
1:20000

(SITE PLAN)

1 Central Station
2 Town Hall
3 Circular Quay

(LEGEND)

● Footpath Extension

Project team City Design and Transformation, Gehl, Transport for NSW, Grimshaw, Aspect Studios, GHD, Jacobs, TCL, Aecom, Acciona, Transdev, Alstom, Sydney Civil

Commendation

Nungalinya
by Incidental Architecture

(COUNTRY)	Larrakia
(LOCATION)	Gulumoerrgin/Darwin, NT
(PHOTOGRAPHER)	Clinton Weaver

(JURY CITATION)
The Nungalinya student accommodation project admirably demonstrates the benefits of designers taking the time to listen and build relationships with clients and the community they serve. It provides accommodation units at Darwin's Nungalinya College for use by Indigenous adult students from remote communities. The staged process (units were built between 2018 and 2023) allowed for an active process of listening, learning and responding, with feedback absorbed into the project's evolving architectural brief.

The simple and elegant units have been designed with sensitivity to culture and climate, and primarily respond to the need for respite, safety and refreshment during the intensive study blocks the college offers. With 100 languages and sub-language groups represented by attending students, the design facilitates communication while offering flexibility to appropriately cater to a vast diversity of backgrounds and cultural needs.

Nungalinya is a superbly considered architectural outcome driven by a deep understanding of community need and a commitment to the client's brief, finding poetry in its functionality.

— Nungalinya was reviewed by Sue Dugdale in *Architecture Australia* May/Jun 2023. See architectureau.com/articles/nungalinya-student-accommodation.

> "The new residential units are designed with the tropical, seasonal shifts in mind and incorporate Indigenous staff and student feedback in their design and further iterations. Together they have significantly beautified the entire accommodation centre of the College, resonating with students' expressed desire to be at the College to learn, but also to recuperate and rest."
> — Ben van Gelderen, principal, Nungalinya College

Architect Incidental Architecture; Project team Daina Cunningham, Matt Elkan; Hayley Skelton, Pearce Cohen; Builder C and R Constructions; Structural engineer WGA

Design Speaks.

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Sydney, 1 August 2025

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Designing a legacy for South-East Queensland.

ArchitectureAu Asks

Canberra, 7 November 2025

The competition system is under scrutiny – how could it be better? Industry leaders respond to a provocation from Camilla Block.

The Architecture Symposium: Indigenising our built environment

Melbourne, 21 November 2025

A pulse check.

For partnership opportunities, to purchase tickets and to register for updates visit:

designspeaks.com.au

Dates and locations are subject to change.

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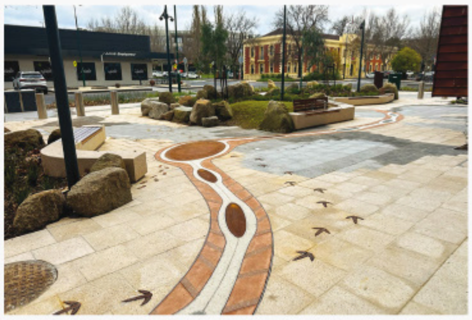
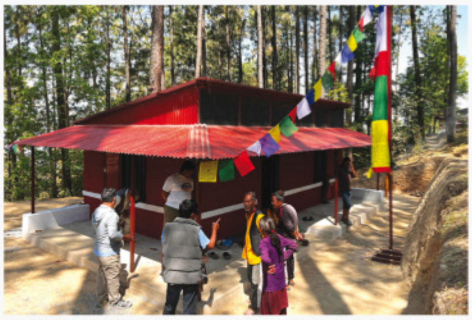
Shortlist

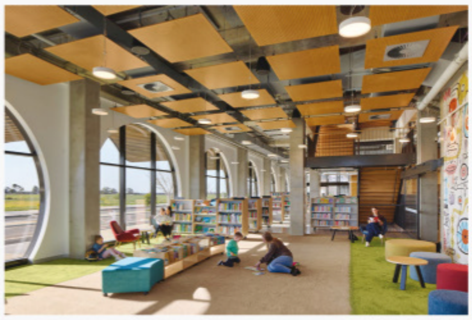
For a gallery of the shortlisted projects, go to: architectureau.com/articles/shortlist-revealed-2025-architectureau-award-for-social-impact



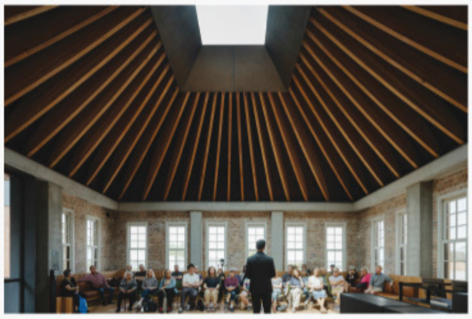
Bendigo Law Forecourt by Aspect Studios
Photography by Aspect Studios



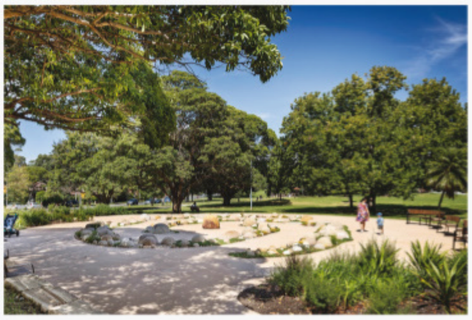
Bhattedanda Village Stupa Sanitation and Caretaker Project by Paul Pholeros Foundation in collaboration with Jasper Ludewig, Harry Catterns, David Donald and Shane Marshall.
Photography by Sandra Meihubers



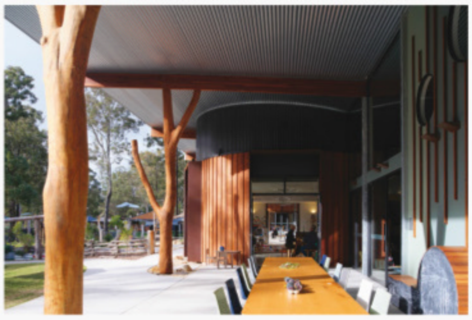
Biyal-a Armstrong Creek Library by Buchan
Photography by Tom Roe



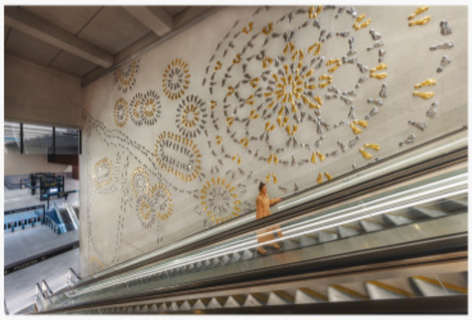
Boot Factory and Mill Hill Centre Precinct by Archer Office with Matt Devine and Co and Aspect Studios
Photography by Hamish McIntosh



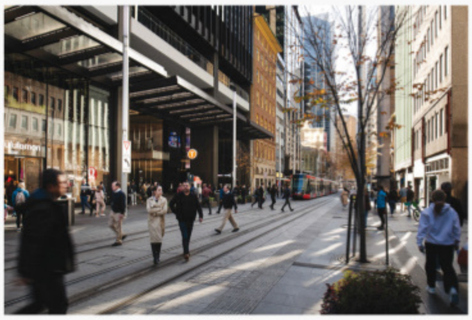
Breathe by Mili Mili
Photography by Andrew Vincent



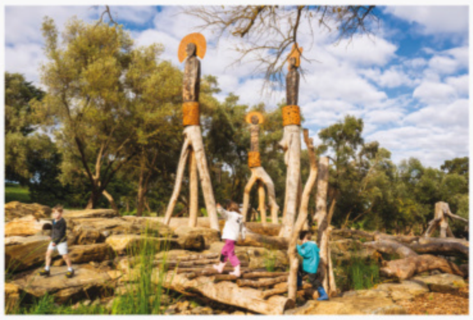
First Steps Count Child and Community Centre by Austin McFarland Architects
Photography by Matthew Carbone



Footprints on Gadigal Nura by Mili Mili
Photography by Scott Cameron



George Street Transformation by City of Sydney
Photography by Richard Glover



Glenthorne National Park – Ityamaiitpinna Yarta Nature Playground by TCL
Photography by Jackie Gu

Shortlist

Habilis by Collins and Turner
Photography by Katherine Lu

Karungkarni Arts Centre by Bower Studio
Photography by Bower Studio

Minjerribah Ganaba by Reddog Architects
Photography by Christopher Frederick Jones

Munarra Centre for Regional Excellence
by ARM Architecture
Photography by Peter Bennetts

Murran – First Nations Business,
Retail and Arts Hub by Dawn Architecture
Photography by Earl Carter

Northern Memorial Park Depot by Searle X
Waldron Architecture
Photography by Peter Bennetts

Nungalinya by Incidental Architecture
Photography by Clinton Weaver

Parramatta Bike Hub by Scale Architecture
Photography by Tim Clark

Perth Airport Terminal 1 Sensory Room
by Plus Architecture
Photography by Nicholas Putrasia

Shortlist

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Ruah Centre for Women and Children
by Architectus
Photography by Dion Robeson

SDA Altona by SDA By Project Friday
Photography by Hortenzia

St Peters Street by Landskap with City of Norwood Payneham and St Peters
Photography by Duncan Mckenzie

Truganina Community Centre by Jasmax (Canvas Projects)
Photography by Peter Bennetts

Wilcannia Health and Wellbeing Centre
by Troppo Architects
Photography by Mitchell Lowe

Windale Hub, bilyabayi by Adriano Pupilli Architects
Photography by Simon Whitbread

Women and Children Hub for Elizabeth Morgan House Aboriginal Women's Services
by Breathe Architecture
Photography by ARC Media

Woodleigh Regenerative Futures Studio
by McIldowie Partners and Joost Bakk
Photography by Earl Carter

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Kirsteen Mackay, Office for Design and Architecture SA
Deo Prasad, University of New South Wales
Stuart Vokes, Vokes and Peters
Georgia Birks, Architecture Australia

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Images: *Landscape of Co-existence by Angela Xu and Georgia Reader*
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